

People suffering marital difficulty most often place their entire attention on the symptoms rather than on the problems. Therefore, they may never address the real barriers in their marriage. They think that the symptoms of adultery, alcoholism, abuse, addictions, attitude swings, etc., are the problems. As a result, they remain frustrated treating only the symptoms. This is similar to a person having a fever and blindly believing the high temperature is the problem instead of the infection which is the cause of the problem. Sadly, this misconception in the marriage often leads to its death, which is divorce.

One of the first symptoms of a diseased marriage is anger. Usually this symptom begins with a disagreement over a decision or with a newly discovered character flaw in the mate. Sometimes anger begins over in-law involvement or financial difficulties. Anger will lead to bitterness, which is the result of a person's prolonged anger. Bitterness will soon result in a person's being critical of his or her mate, always looking for and dwelling on negative views of the mate; it will lead to doubt. The couple begins to doubt whether they should have ever gotten married to begin with, and some even doubt their relationship with God. Doubt will lead to the erosion of the love and faithfulness that nurture the growth of the relationship. By the time doubt enters the picture, the topsoil has begun to erode severely. Erosion will promote fear of failure and its consequences. If failure of the marriage does occur, a person may carry many of these symptoms into later relationships, causing a never-ending cycle of failure.

Keep in mind that these ABC's are only symptoms as the fever is to the infection. Before medical science became more efficient, a high fever could be deadly; today, even if a person dies from a high fever, the infirmity that initiated the fever is listed as the cause of death. In some ways in the Christian realm, we are still living in the dark ages when it comes to diagnosing spiritual sickness. This is evident in the general lack of knowledge about the sanctity of

marriage. Sadly, we have found that many pastors and other Christian marriage counselors deal with surface symptoms, but they will ultimately fail at exposing spiritually rooted problems. The world's methods and ideas are inadequate in light of God's Biblical principles.

God made us stewards of His creation, not owners. As owner, He designated all of the affairs of the garden (Matt 20:1-16). As stewards, we are accountable to God for living according to His principles. The principles of planting and reaping are regulated by nature which is controlled by God. In the Bible we find principles that will promote success in marriage and in all areas of life. Each time we act outside of God's word in marriage, we are denying the authority of God over it.

The ABC's or symptoms that we have already listed attest to the fact that we have usurped God's ownership of marriage. The marriage has become polluted with sin which separates us further from God. Indeed, our earthly marriages are a reflection of the condition of our relationship with God. Just as sin separates us from God, it also separates us from each other. The root of most sin is pride, as it was with the first sin ever committed (Isa 14:12-15 and Ezek 28). Even with man in the garden of Eden, pride of being able to know the difference between good and evil promoted his fall. Just as the letter "I" is the center letter of sin and pride, so was the "tree of knowledge of good and evil" in the center of the garden. The big "I" has a name that is spelled "s e l f i s h n e s s." Remember, this pamphlet is called the ABC's of Marriage and the "s" part of this title is not a symptom; it is the main problem. The "s" stands for selfishness. A selfish person is hardly ever interested in God's desires for his life. He tends to be self-sufficient and independent of a higher authority. He has an "I can do" attitude that promotes "what I want," "what I need," "what I say," and "what I think." He has great difficulty submitting his will to God because he feels that he can accomplish the requirements of daily living without God's guidance or help. This is one of the reasons that we always begin a time of marriage counseling with the same question to each party: "Who are you attempting to please, God or

yourself?" If the answer is truthfully "God," then the marriage has much hope. Without God at the helm, disaster is imminent.

As we see in Ephesians 5, marriage is God's way of allowing man and woman to experience the joy and intimacy of oneness. This is a mirror of the relationship that Christ has with His bride, the Church. Just as Christ is faithfully committed to us, His bride, we should be faithfully committed to our mates. Both of these relationships require that we lose the singleness of our identity as an individual by blending with the identity of our Maker.

The process involved in making commitments is similar to the process of making concrete. The basic ingredients for making concrete are sand, stone, water, and cement. The sand and stone, when mixed with water and cement, lose their own identity and become one, as concrete. These ingredients have become much stronger by being joined together with the water and the cement. Much of the sand along the shores of the world was formed by extremely hot volcanic stones exploding as they came in contact with the ocean's water. Woman can be compared to sand as she was created from man; man can be compared to the stone. To be born again, there is a baptism of the Holy Spirit, who would be represented by the water (Jn 7:37-39). Jesus Christ would be the cement. If we are truly committed to Christ, then our marriage will be as solid as concrete. In fact, for God to compare the relationship of husband and wife with the relationship of Christ and the Church is concrete evidence of the sanctity that He places on marriage (Eph 5:21-32).

Sometimes we hear people make the statement, "Not every marriage was meant to be" or "They should have never gotten married." These and other similar statements attack the sanctity of marriage. Whether the couple should have married or should stay married are not valid questions; they are married, and God has made them one. To make these statements is to disregard the fact that God has made them one, thus denying the power of God to change their lives and the course of their marriage. In Matthew 19:6, God upholds His part of the

marriage covenant (agreement) by establishing the sanctity of marriage when Jesus stated, "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." This includes not only the husband and wife, but also judges and lawyers. In Malachi 2:14-16, God states that He hates divorce. In fact, these verses state that God considers divorce to be treacherous. It is the utmost concern to God that the covenant of marriage be preserved, even if it means that the husband and wife must be willing to die for one another. This is what Jesus did for His Church, and He expects no less of us in our marriage.

Divorce and remarriage are very controversial topics; we will not attempt to sort out the different doctrines concerning them in this message. In 1 John 1:9, the Word states that if we confess our sins to God and ask His forgiveness, He is faithful to forgive us. So, what does this mean if you are in your second or later marriage? Do exactly what the Word says. If we are to receive God's desire for our current marriage, we must repent for our part in the breakup of our previous marriage and accept the forgiveness of Jesus Christ for our wrongdoing. Then, we must acknowledge Christ as the Head of our current marriage and honor all of His Biblical principles concerning marriage. Does this mean that divorce is condoned by God? Absolutely no. Out of God's mercy He tolerates man's sinful nature and gives him an avenue of redemption as 1 John 1:9 states.

Unfortunately, some husbands and wives make it very difficult for their mates to love them; but Jesus had and has the same problem. He has every right to stop loving His bride since we doubt Him and commit spiritual adultery against Him by submitting to worldly desires. It was sin, including ours, that caused Him to be crucified; yet He never uses any of these reasons to stop loving us. If it were possible for Jesus to stop loving us, it would destroy His covenant relationship with us. Thank God this is impossible. (Jn 10:27-29).

Just as Jesus loves us where we are regardless of our condition, so should we love our mate. In our own ability, it may be impossible to love our mate because of hurts or circumstances. When we are incapable of giving love, then Christ is able. We can truly do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Phil 4:13). If we desire to please God, we may even have to pray that God will give us the ability and even the desire to love our mate where they are (Phil 2:13). For there to be success with this prayer, we must keep our relationship with Jesus Christ solid. This is accomplished by spending quality time in prayer and by studying God's Word. Remember, a good monitor of the health of our relationship with Christ is measured by the health of our marriage to our mates.

To have success in our marriage, we must submit to the dying process, thereby gaining life in Christ through the death of selfishness (Rom 6:1-8). In this dying-to-self process, we actually begin to see our mate through the eyes of God. When we see him/her as being created in God's own image and hopefully see God's purpose for his/her life, our thoughts and speech truly change. As we honestly desire to see our mate and respond to him/her as Jesus Christ would, things will never be the same. We take on a Christ-like behavior. Anger does not raise its ugly head anymore because agape love (God's unconditional love) now reigns in our heart. Bitterness is chopped off at the root by our belief in Christ and His power to change us and our mate. The critical words and attitudes cannot survive in our minds if we are caring, compassionate, and committed followers of God. Instead of doubting, we decide to honor Jesus and be dedicated to our mate. The erosion that had taken place is now filled with words and actions of edification because we now realize that this life is so short, but it decides our eternal homes. Fear slinks away as we now have faith in God and what He is doing in our life and in our marriage (Phil 1:6; 1 Jn 5:4).

Even though the negative ABC's are only symptoms, the positive ABC's are genuine problem solvers. We must be willing for God to bring them into reality in our lives; He is willing and

able. Are you willing? You may be wondering about the "S" on the positive side of the ABC's. One thing that always humbles selfishness in any person is servanthood. Jesus showed us the perfect example of this in John 13:1-17 as He humbled Himself to serve His disciples. The washing of feet both on the serving and the receiving end is quite a humbling experience. Husbands and wives might try this some time as the Holy Spirit directs. Paul referred to himself as a bondservant of Jesus Christ. What a wonderful challenge for us to desire for our lives! Servanthood in the kingdom of God in no way conflicts with being fellow heirs with Christ. In fact, these actually complement each other as the life of the apostle Paul testifies. As Jesus so aptly put it in John 13:17 concerning servanthood, "If you know these things, happy are you if you do them."

Men sometimes complain that their wives do not respect them. But when questioned, they do not show respect or consideration for their wives by serving her at times by washing dishes, cleaning some areas of the house, or even picking up after themselves. Some people expect their mate to serve them, but they do not enjoy reciprocating with the same effort. It takes both the man and the woman to have children, but often the servant aspect of child rearing is left to one individual. Of course, the whole matter with servanthood is based on our relationship with God. As we study the words of Jesus and the apostle Paul, maybe we can attain an attitude adjustment about being a servant to God and our fellow man, especially our mate.

Marriage does not cause problems. Rather, problems are caused by the husband and wife in the marriage. To say that marriage causes problems is to contradict God. For God said, "It is not good that man should be alone" (Gen 2:18). 1 Corinthians 7 speaks of the good that marriage produces. People cause problems in the institution of marriage, not God. God is love, and He designed marriage to be based on love and unity (Eph 5). We have all heard people state that it is difficult being a Christian, but being a Christian is not the problem. Rather, the problem is the person. This analogy is true in marriage. The problem is the people, not the institution of mar-

riage. For the husband and the wife to blame marriage for their problems is a refusal to be accountable to God, themselves, and their fellow man.

Consider carefully what you have read within this pamphlet. Life in this world is very short, and how we live here does affect whether it is a miserable life or an abundant life. There are always consequences to sin, whether sooner or later. The blood of Jesus still washes away sin; so, let us place all of our sins under His blood and walk in freedom. Let us realize that God owns our marriages, and we need to allow Him to guide them in every way. Ask God to allow you to see your mate as through His eyes and believe that He will do this. You will love your mate with a renewed fervor because God is love (1 Jn 4:7-8). Rejoice and be glad in your marriage with much thanksgiving as you yield to the power of the Holy spirit (Phil 4:4-9; Rom 8:14). Husband and wife have become one in earthly marriage with each other and we have become one in spiritual marriage with Jesus Christ.



The ABC's Of Marriage

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