

The Importance of Pastoral Care to Christian Marriage

**PM 514 Pastoral Care
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A key component of pastoral care within the congregation of the local church is the need for pastors and congregation members to provide Godly support, counsel and instruction to its members in times of crisis and concern. There are many areas in which the tools of ministry are needed as people cope in these situations. As Thomas Oden observed, “Pastoral care is learning properly to shepherd the flock.”

One such area of importance in the church is the need for ongoing teaching, guidance and support of the Christian marriage.

“Theologically, Christians view marriage as a spiritual relationship. It cannot be considered apart from the biblical ideas of one flesh, the covenant relationship, and the danger of idolatry. Ecclesiastically, marriage is a concern of the church as an institution. A pastor cannot counsel a husband and a wife without some thought for his official position and its effects upon this couple and the community” (Oates, Ed. & Southard, 151).

This quote, while from a book on pastoral counseling, highlights the need for pastoral care to be provided in this critical area of the life of the church. The phrase “without some thought for his official position” speaks of the importance of the pastor’s position as outlined in Ephesians 4:11-14. A pastor should know the saints, equip them, love them, work with them and call upon them as he demonstrates pastoral care for their well-being. A pastor who has never preached a sermon regarding any aspect of God’s plan for marriage or its ongoing importance to remain vital and growing will likely not be trusted with the concerns of church members who are in the pews and in need.

A pastor’s need to be “on the front lines of relationship checkups” also flows from his ability to develop the relationships and listening skills needed to “see unhealthy patterns developing within couples” (Lehman, 36). Again I would stress the need for a

pastor to preach, teach and in other ways speak of the principles of marriage before issues arise, as this provides credibility to future involvement with marital counseling.

Bob Russell in his book, Marriage by the Book urges Christian couples to grow to maturity through several means.

“That means you go to church regularly, and you sit with each other; you hold hands when you say grace at the table; you talk about your spiritual values, and you make a commitment to grow in Jesus Christ” (Russell, 49).

This advice positions couples in a place where their needs can be met through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It also should motivate the pastor to be receptive to God’s leading as he preaches, teaches and provides what models he can around the Christian marriage.

There are some in the church body that question one’s ability to offer support to others when they themselves are not “above reproach” in an area. The finest “wounded healer” I have met is a man that I refer to as “my pastor,” Pastor Frank Carl. I have been encouraged by him in my own marriage through his admitted shortcomings. On our children’s Sunday this year he preached one of the most moving family sermons I have ever heard; it was titled, “Who is at fault when a child goes astray?” Through this message, he opened doors for families to encourage their children in the Lord and also provided guidance for those with wayward children. As I sat and listened, I thought of how he has struggled with his children and been both hurt and rewarded through these relationships. As he shared solid, loving, biblical counsel that built up the body not with legalism and shame, but forgiveness and love, I was overwhelmed by the doors that the Holy Spirit was opening in the hearts of God’s people on that day. Surely Pastor Frank was an example of God’s grace and love for the imperfect that travel life’s road. If a

sermon such as that does not have an impact on the effectiveness of the ability to apply pastoral care, I do not know what will. Similarly Pastor Frank speaks of his wife and children often in our service times and on personal calls. He never seems far removed from the love of his family.

Recently I spoke with our minister of pastoral care and was surprised when Pastor Wayne informed me that the largest amount of his counseling time was spent addressing the unhappiness of the marital relationships of church members. His concern for the Christian marriage seems to be well founded as he spoke of a grim statistic. Christian marriages only have a one percent more likely chance of succeeding than a non-Christian marriage (51% to 50%). He noted three important relationship areas to stress during pastoral care which are commitment, contentment and communication.

God's word certainly addresses each of these areas. In Matthew 19:5-9, Jesus teaches on marriage commitment:

"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate. Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."

Certainly we see that Jesus did not find divorce to be an acceptable option when times get tough. Dr. Larry Crab explains Romans 8:28 as it can be applied to marriage in this way,

"If we deeply believe the Lord is able to work on our behalf in all circumstances, then no collection of marital setbacks will prompt us to seriously consider divorce or withdrawal" (Crabb, 115).

Hebrews 13:4-5 teaches on marital contentment:

“Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”

Dr. Crabb explains, “Our personal needs for security and significance can be genuinely and fully met only in relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ” (Crabb, 34). This means if a Christian is looking to a spouse to fill him or her with contentment and expects the other to meet all of their needs, these expectations cannot be met. Finally, on communication, Tim LaHaye says it well when he writes:

“Problems and differences in a marriage are not dangerous-not being able to communicate the differences, or problem areas, is dangerous. As long as two people can keep the lines of communication open and freely express their feelings differences can be resolved” (LaHaye, 117).

Through this brief discussion, there could be those that still wonder why I believe that ongoing pastoral care of the Christian marriage should be an important concern and vital ministry within the church. Consider the following, “The individual tends to relive his primary family group experience in any group to which he belongs” (Oates, 150). If we recognize this dynamic, it becomes extremely important to the health and maturity of the community of believers to stress the importance of the Christian home and marriage.

I would agree that pre-marital counseling is imperative in assisting a couple as they begin their new life together. As Dr. McMickle states in Before We Say I Do: Seven Steps to a Healthy Marriage, “The true measure of a marriage is based on how a couple confronts and overcomes the various challenges that arise over time” (McMickle, 8). I believe there must be ongoing pastoral care within the body of the church so that “Healthy marriages thrive as much in the midst of the routines of daily life as they do in the special moments

of celebration, passion and excitement” (McMickle, 8). For many, “Marriage is like taking a bath. After you’ve been in it for a while, it’s not so hot” (Ortlund, 59).

A key need in the pastoral care of the Christian body should include sound counsel during the early years of marriage when tests of love, patience and commitment arise through life’s hardships. This care needs to be delivered not simply from the clergy, but also from spiritually mature and well seasoned couples within the church.

“I am convinced that divorce rates would fall drastically and the number of healthy and happy marriages would increase dramatically if couples would only keep faith with each other and with themselves where the words contained in the wedding vows are concerned” (McMickle, 48).

Such faith can be encouraged through the examples of other couples who share their ongoing faith stories and model for others the truth of Ephesians 5:31. Faithfulness must be encouraged in the body of the church. “The challenge for long-term marriage is to be faithful unto death” (McMickle, 58). This is the type of faith that the church is called to place in our Lord (Revelations 2:10).

When Christian marriage is cared for and valued in the church it becomes a viable tool for evangelistic ministry. Personally I have had many in my secular workplace ask me how my marriage has continued to be a vital and loving source of strength after our ten years together. Even some in the church have wondered if we have experienced many struggles in our marriage. We have experienced many storms together and we have many thanks to those Christian couples and church leaders that have provided pastoral care to our marriage from modeling, praying, encouraging, teaching and preaching in various forms to us on our journey together. God continues to do great things for us in the oneness of our Christ-centered relationship and my heart aches for those many couples within the body of the church that do not share this great joy and blessing.

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