

JOHN HENDERSON

LEADER'S GUIDE
FOR

catching foxes

A GOSPEL- GUIDED JOURNEY TO MARRIAGE
a resource for premarital counseling



TABLE OF CONTENTS

How to Use this Leader's Guide	4
Why Marriage Preparation Ministry?	7
Overall Goals for the Marriage Preparation Process	11

BEFORE THE WEDDING: SESSION OUTLINES

Pre-session A	Making Contact & Introductions	15
Session 1	Telling Your Story	19
Session 2	The Reason for Everything, Even Marriage	23
Session 3	Understanding Who You Are	25
Session 4	Understanding What Marriage is Really About	28
Session 5	The Covenant of Marriage	31
Session 6	Becoming a Husband	34
Session 7	Becoming a Wife	36
Session 8	Understanding Marriage Conflict	38
Session 9	Resolving Marriage Conflict Biblically	40
Session 10	The Glory of Christ in Sexual Union	44
Session 11	The Glory of Christ in Financial Stewardship	48
Session 12	Getting a Grip On Your Expectations	51

AFTER THE WEDDING: SESSION OUTLINES

Session 13	In the Wake	53
Session 14	Reality	56
Session 15	Life Ahead, In Community	58

HOW TO USE THIS LEADER'S GUIDE

Identify the Best Format

There could be many ways to use *Catching Foxes* as a premarital counseling resource. You may be helping one couple prepare for marriage, or you may be leading a small group of couples toward their wedding days. I have seen situations where pastors and churches offer a pre-marriage class. *Catching Foxes* could be made to fit any of these formats. So the first decision you will need to make as a leader is in choosing the most appropriate delivery format.

Couple-to-Couple Format

If you are a “discipling” or “mentoring” couple in your church community and you have been assigned a couple to counsel toward marriage, then the couple-to-couple format will probably be the best option. It will be up to you to arrange a suitable timeline and structure for helping the couple you have been asked to serve. The session outlines in this leader's guide will help you develop the suitable structure.

Under this arrangement the couple you are leading will read a chapter, respond to the questions, and then gather with you for review, discussion of highlights, and to work through particular topics or struggles most pertinent to them. Such a pattern utilizes the unique value of the couple-to-couple format because it allows you the freedom to draw out and address in a suitable degree of depth the specific concerns facing the couple you are leading at any specific time in their journey toward marriage.

Small Group Format

If you are leading a small group of couples through *Catching Foxes*, then, as you can imagine, the small group format will be most fitting. While the content of the sessions will be similar to the other formats, the way in which you structure and lead the sessions will be somewhat different. For example, the sessions themselves will need to be long enough to accommodate small group discussion and interaction around the material.

Unfortunately the small group format will not provide the kind of environment for in depth sharing of all the couples or the opportunity to address the personal struggles of particular couples with any degree of depth. It may, however, provide the opportunity for you to see which couples in any given small group need additional counseling in preparation for marriage.

Large Group Format

It may be your desire to use *Catching Foxes* to prepare a large group of people for marriage (i.e., upward of 20 members). In this case, the large group format will be appropriate. This format will involve didactic teaching, small group discussion breakouts, and other means to help a larger group interact with the material. While you can cover a lot of content with a greater number of people, this format can diminish the amount of genuine discussion, the sharing of personal struggles, and the addressing of specific concerns facing specific couples in the group.

The large group format also makes it more logistical tedious to follow up with couples after their wedding day. Again, the 3 post-wedding chapters can be worked through in a large group, but the ability to draw out and speak into specific struggles for particular couples, especially with serious problems, is minimized.

Identify the Best Timeline

Catching Foxes has not been written with an exact timeline in mind. The material can be covered in 6 months or, if need be, in 6 weeks. The timeline is flexible and can be tailored to the specific needs of the couple or couples being served.

Six-Week Timeline

From time to time a man and woman become engaged and want to marry quickly (perhaps in under 2 months). Sometimes a couple waits until “the last minute” to start and complete their premarital counseling. Under these conditions, the six-week schedule may be most appropriate (unless the couple needs to be encouraged to slow down and push the wedding out a little further). By six-week schedule, I mean six-weeks of premarital counseling before the wedding. This timeline will require you to cover around 2 chapters of material every week leading up to the wedding ceremony. You may opt for two meetings a week to get through all the sessions, or you may choose one meeting a week and then cover twice the material per meeting.

As a general rule, I do not encourage the six-week timeline. Such an aggressive timeline makes it difficult to peel back the layers of a couple’s life, identify the particular struggles each couple brings toward their marriage, and absorb the material in a meaningful way. Now, I think the gospel can transform people’s lives in far less than 6 weeks. I believe the Word of God can bring powerful change and growth into the hearts of His children without time constraints. I think God can bless a couple that decided to engage and marry in a month. I simply want to caution you from rushing a couple

toward their marriage vows, perhaps without a suitable understanding of marriage or their vows, simply because the couple is in a hurry to get married.

Twelve-Week Timeline

This timeline allows you to complete a session each week leading up to the wedding. It tends to allow a good amount of time for everyone to complete each chapter of *Catching Foxes* as well as prepare for upcoming sessions.

I tend to prefer the 12-week timeline, give or take a week, because it moves at a steady pace without generating any pressure to get through the material quickly. The couple you are leading will probably feel the need to stay on track, but without feeling rushed. The chapters will be covered close enough in time to build on one another while giving the couple enough time to think about the Scriptures they are reading and reflect on what they are learning.

Hybrid Timeline

After all that has been said, I also want you to feel completely free to develop whatever timeline and structure you believe to be most wise and helpful. Many couples find somewhere between eight and ten weeks to be an optimal period of time for premarital counseling. If six weeks seems too short and twelve weeks seems to long, then you should feel free to pick something in the middle.

WHY MARRIAGE PREPARATION MINISTRY?

From time to time I am asked why I believe preparation for marriage matters at all. People are going to do what they are going to do – 3 months of preparation won't make a difference in the long haul, right? Well, I think it can make a difference. I think there are specific perils that can be warned against and avoided. I think couples can be set upon a Spirit-dependent path and sent along a God-honoring trajectory into marriage that will actually help them live more fruitfully and joyfully in marriage. Let me take a couple of pages to explain what I mean.

Every generation of people inherits, propagates, and faces a great many challenges, sins, and hardships related to marriage. The generation of men and women about to enter their marriage covenants in the present age are no exception. The threats to a biblical view and function of marriage seem to be increasing. The young men and women considering marriage and looking forward to marriage, from my point of view, are as unprepared and confused as ever. They need help, just as we all needed help, and still need help.

The Reality of the World in Which We Live

According to US Census Bureau data released in 2012, the United States averaged around 2.2 million marriages a year between 2002 and 2008. During that same time period there were approximately 860,000 divorces on average per year. Almost every American, 90% to be exact, will be married at least one time. A great many will be divorced. According to the Barna Group (2008), 33% of adults over the age of 18 have gone through at least one divorce. Almost 40% of all American children will grow up in a home without both biological parents present (State of Our Unions report, 2005). We live in a world that devalues marriage. To cast it aside, apparently, just isn't a big deal.

Sexual immorality has become a normative way of life in many cultures. The number of men and women visiting my office because they are entangled in the cords of adultery continues to rise. I recently spoke to a group of young people in western Europe who actively seek a wide range of sexual partners by whatever means they can devise. In their words, abstinence and sexual purity is physiologically unhealthy. To reserve sexual pleasures for the marriage bed, they plainly stated, was morally infeasible.

Pornography is not only accessible, but regularly indulged by men and women all over the world. You don't have to work at finding it. Explicit images, film, and ideas seem to be everywhere in western societies.

On a regular basis I see parents reek havoc on the marriages of their grown children. In blatant and subtle ways, parents can invite division, conflict, and doubt into the minds and marriages of their children. They can question the way their children raise children,

spend money, or use time. They can place demands and expectations upon their children and exact punishment once those demands and expectations are not met.

The list of threats to marriage in our age could keep going. These I have mentioned simply begin to highlight the need for us to prepare ourselves well for marriage, and give ourselves to preparing the next generation well for marriage.

The Reality of Our Hearts

The dangers to our marriages are not only around us, but inside us. The very reasons we seek marriage deserves careful scrutiny. After all, our motivations for marriage can arise from an assorted mix of selfish interests. Only Jesus Christ married with absolutely pure motives. The rest of us come with a mixed bag. We need a heightened awareness of the sacredness of the marriage covenant and its place in our lives as a gift from God for His glory and our good.

When I listen to people talk about marriage, less and less am I hearing marriage presented as something beautiful and sacred (holy and of God). More and more do I hear it described and appreciated for its *social helpfulness* (to serve some kind of overall social purpose for the individual and society, like provide order and better opportunity to procreate).

At other times I hear marriage offered in the service of *personally pragmatism*, as something to help people's lives function a little more efficiently – to build personal network or bear children together or split bills or share household duties.

Perhaps we speak of marriage as a *hedonistic device*, an aid to earthly pleasure or a cure for personal pain – a means to have sex without guilt, or a companion for life entertainment, or a person to make me feel good about myself, or someone to take away my loneliness.

Good, biblical preparation for marriage is needed because our hearts will always gravitate toward these kinds of self-centered motives and idols. Our hearts, by themselves, will not gravitate toward joyful self-sacrifice and pure worship of God in marriage. The Scripture, and pre-marriage counseling based on the Scripture, can keep calling us back to God's intention for marriage. It can keep casting us upon His grace to help us remain faithful to His desire and design for us.

The Opportunity to Proclaim the Gospel of the Glory of God in Jesus Christ

Even though threats to marriage exist around us and in us, the delights of marriage and the opportunity for God-honoring marriage remain. Marriage exists to display and enjoy the glory of our great God, especially through its unique role as a living picture of Christ and the Church.

Good marriage preparation can present this picture to engaged couples and try to embed the image in their minds. The process itself can be a means to impart gospel truth and then learn how it can shape and energize the way husbands and wives relate to one another.

OVERALL OBJECTIVES FOR THE MARRIAGE PREPARATION PROCESS

1. Move from *Man-centeredness* to *God-centeredness* in understanding and approaching marriage and, better yet, life as a whole (Genesis 1:26-27; 2:18)

The vast majority of men and women entering marriage and currently in marriage do not actually view, interpret, and live out marriage with God in the middle. I don't think we should ever act surprised by this reality. We're sinners. Apart from God's merciful instruction and help, we will misunderstand and misuse just about every gift He ever gives. We will accept His gifts as primarily about us rather than Him. Marriage is no exception. More often than not, His design and purpose for marriage will be rejected outright or seriously misunderstood. I think the problem begins with a common distortion of God's intent for creating marriage in the first place.

2. Lay groundwork for *Christ-exaltation* instead of *Marriage-exaltation* (Ephesians 5:25-32)

This point builds upon the previous point. A God-centered understanding and practice of marriage will lead to the exaltation of Jesus Christ in marriage rather than the exaltation of marriage itself. A disregard or low treatment of marriage does not represent the only way to wrongly position marriage. Our estimation of marriage can actually become too high. It may actually be possible to worship the institution itself rather than the Person to whom it points.

In fact, I would argue that most of our frustrations, disappointments, and resentments about marriage flow from the exaltation of marriage over Jesus Christ. We can throw into marriage gobs of energy, time, emotion, and money without ever placing these resources into service for Jesus Christ. We can seek from marriage a great many things for which it was never designed: meaning, identity, happiness, or even a cure for pain or suffering. It never really works long term. Marriage always proves to be a disappointment to anyone who has placed their hope in *it*.

3. Cultivate *Spirit-dependence* rather than *Self-dependence* (Ephesians 5:18-21)

When faced with epic callings or difficult tasks, most of us tend to either avoid and run or grit our teeth and charge ahead. None of these responses fit God's idea of a wise approach to marriage. He thinks we need Him far more than we realize. He thinks we have always needed Him more than we realize. Marriage can help us realize.

From Genesis 3 to the end of Scripture, people have proven their desire for independence from God. We want what we want. We decide if something's wrong according to what's right in our own eyes. If something happens to be wrong, we'll fix it our way. We are self-sufficient and self-atoning by fleshly impulse. Like Adam and Eve, we want to be like God, but apart from Him. We prefer to sew fig leaves for ourselves rather than cry out for mercy. When He draws near, we prefer to run and hide from Him rather than to Him.

In the hearts and lives of redeemed people, this should be changing. In the marriages of redeemed people, this should be changing. In marriage, God has given a gift and assigned a mission that we cannot possibly achieve apart from the grace and power of God. We have been called to reflect and enjoy Christ and the Church together. Husbands have been called to love their wives, "just as Christ also loved the church." Wives have been called to "*be subject* to their own husbands as to the Lord." Who in their right mind aims to tackle this in his or her own strength?

4. Encourage *Humble Reverence* for the Lord's creation and gift without instilling *Paralyzing Fears* (Matthew 19:1-10)

I have already argued that we can exalt marriage above Jesus Christ. We can worship the created thing over the Creator. It represents one way to position marriage wrongly in relation to God and everything else. Now I want to talk about another way to position marriage wrongly: by devaluing the gift and its beauty. We can regard it too poorly.

The Scripture speaks of marriage as a covenant before God, not merely a legal arrangement before man. It speaks of marriage a union forged by God Himself, not simply a social structure for people to use and discard as they please.

5. Foster *Healthy Self-Awareness* rather than *Blind Ignorance* regarding sin, personal styles, relational differences, and the need for God's constant grace (Proverbs 12:15; 14:12; 21:2)

Sin blinds us to the reality of who we are and what we do. The way we live seems right in our own eyes, which could be one reason we live so committed to the way we live. The manner in which we see, think, and respond makes utter sense from our point of view. We value what we value *because it's inherently valuable*. A certain kind of clean house; a certain use of time; a particular approach to rearing children. We address conflict the way we address conflict because it's the right way to address conflict. If it doesn't make sense to other people, then they probably need a better perspective. Right?

In the glorious providence of God, marriage to another human being will begin to challenge and even demolish this kind of approach to God, ourselves, and everybody else. I think we need to prepare one another for the challenge. “The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick. Who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9) If we are going to see clearly and reason truthfully, then we all need help.

6. Exhort an *Atmosphere of Grace* over an *Atmosphere of Law* (Matthew 9:10-13)

Few dangers, I believe, pose a greater threat to the health and joyfulness of a marriage union than self-righteousness and legalism. Self-righteousness can be characterized as an attitude and condition of the sinful flesh that seeks to establish a righteousness of its own before God and others. It wants to obtain and maintain right standing before God and others based upon its own merits, rather than based upon the merits of Jesus Christ (Rom. 10:3-4).

Legalism can be characterized as an entire outlook and system of life by which we interact with God and others according to our self-righteousness and the self-righteousness of others. Law dominates legalism, not grace. Human works reign supreme, not faith working itself through love. Outward duty stands far above heart devotion. Proper moral behavior becomes the test of God's presence and pleasure rather than humble hearts walking in genuine repentance and true worship. Rather than receiving and maintaining fellowship with the Lord and others as a precious, undeserved gift, we try to earn and maintain these by our moral performance. Others, therefore, should earn and maintain the presence and power of God by their moral performance too.

The gospel counsels us in a different direction. We have become adopted children of God because of His mercy. He redeemed, reconciled, and forgave us because of God's great love for us and the favor He lavished upon us through Jesus Christ.

Now, we want to please Him, but not to earn a good standing or to make ourselves good or to make ourselves look good, but because He loves us and has given us a new heart, a heart filled us with His Holy Spirit. Gratitude, not guilt, should fill the atmosphere of a life united to Christ.

The law of God, which can be understood as the whole caboodle of old covenant commandments and prohibitions God imparted through His written Word in order to show the sinfulness of sin, hammer home our need for a Savior, lead us to Jesus Christ, and offer a summing up of what it means to love God and others, has been written upon our hearts. We can confess our sinfulness to God and others in honesty and humility because Christ has paid for our sin and covered us in His righteousness. We can forgive others for the same reason, and because He has accomplished this redemption for them as well. We don't have to perfect ourselves, or anyone else. We don't need to score our

performance or anyone else. We can rest in the sanctifying work of God's Spirit in the hearts of His people over time.

7. Gain commitment to a *Lifestyle of Reconciliation* rather than a *Fix-it Mentality* (2 Corinthians 5:14-21)

Saying that every marriage will have problems, from my point of view, doesn't even begin to capture the peril of our condition. While every marriage will face problem events and troubling moments to be prayed and talked through over time, limiting the predicament to these isolated events and moments grossly underestimates the scope and destructiveness of a union between two sinful people. The union of two sinful people is itself a massive catastrophe. It's a miracle of God, no doubt, and a glorious catastrophe.

Let me try to explain. Wrongdoing will happen between a husband and wife, often and painfully, whether in heart attitude and motivation or outward behavior and words. The reality of our sinfulness is not that we think and do bad things from time to time. *My Sinfulness*, as a phrase, refers to an entire philosophy of life that lowers God and exalts myself at the very core. I crave, fret, fight, defend, lust, retaliate, jockey for position, dig in, accuse, hide, compete, blame, avoid, and punish people who break my laws, not as a collection of isolated bad choices, but as expressions of my fanatical commitment to my own glory and kingdom. It may be a very Christianized looking kingdom, but its mine.

In fact, Jesus Christ may be very welcome in the kingdom, but as a servant to my wishes. A spouse will be cause for celebration in my kingdom, so long as they follow the rules, and especially if they prove useful. Think about two people with that objective for life, perhaps unknown and unspoken, getting together for life. Just picture two fighting roosters placed in a cage. There won't simply be a few disagreements every now and then. There will be bloodshed. A honeymoon period maybe, then war.

Reconciliation will be needed as a way of life, not as an occasional problem-resolution technique. Grief over personal sin, humble repentance, gracious forgiveness, meditation upon gospel promises, compassionate overlooking of faults, joyful service, and many other forms of reconciliatory lifestyle, will be needed each day. We will need God to make us new, and conform us to His image over time.

Once we begin to see the seriousness of our condition we can begin to experience our desperation for God and our need to believe everything the gospel heralds. In the gospel, God calls us to and equips us for a lifestyle of reconciliation. He gives us life with a new meaning and mission – His kingdom come and His will be done.

8. Cultivate a *Dedication to Longsuffering* rather than a quest for *Nirvana* (1 Peter 1:3-9)

I think marriage can and should be full of joyfulness, gladness, and wonder. I think devotion to God and spouse should fuel our duty. I think heart affection should compel outward action, and I believe our souls should find deep fulfillment in loving others the way Jesus Christ loves us. I think God wants us to be deeply happy in Him and amazed by His generous gifts, including marriage.

Such an approach to life and marriage does not come easily. Even as chosen and redeemed children of God, our pride and selfishness makes it quite difficult to *enjoy* serving others and *relish* opportunities to sacrifice for their good. It takes time to learn *love* as God knows and shows love.

Sometimes duty and commitment will compel us to love others before pleasant feelings set in, and this can be called devotion too, for a time at least. Learning to enjoy all that the Lord enjoys, and delight the way God delights takes faith over a lifetime. It takes a lifetime eating from His Word, drinking from His Spirit, and submitting ourselves and our faith to a process of testing and refinement.

Marriage might be part of that process of testing and refinement, just as every other area of life could be part. God encourages us to not grow weary in doing good (1 Corinthians 15:58), because its worth it.

At some point, I must add, real heart affection and godly love for others needs to take the lead. If the bulk of my manners and ways toward my spouse consistently find their origin or motivation in duty and discipline, then something is wrong in my soul. Listen to how C.S. Lewis puts it.

“A *perfect* man would never act from a sense of duty; he’d always *want* the right thing more than the wrong one. Duty is only a substitute for love (of God and of other people) like a crutch which is a substitute for a leg. Most of us need the crutch at times; but of course it is idiotic to use the crutch when our own legs (our own loves, tastes, habits etc.) can do the journey on their own.” (*Letters of C. S. Lewis*/1966, p. 277)

9. Emphasize *Trajectory* rather than *Arrival* (Philippians 1:6)

No process of marriage preparation can bring people to a place of perfect readiness before they even enter the marriage covenant. I think we should be more concerned with helping them down the best road than getting them to a particular destination. The previous 8 points are framed as trajectories, not places of arrival.

PRE-SESSION: MAKING CONTACT & INTRODUCTIONS

This session can be completed in a formal setting, like an office, or in an informal setting, like a restaurant. It may last 30 minutes or 2 hours. You can decide how to cover the objectives of this meeting in the most appropriate form.

A. Session Objectives

1. Get to know one another in a more personal way through the sharing of brief personal histories and testimonies
2. Overview the premarital counseling process and establish a tentative schedule of meetings
3. Provide a copy of *Catching Foxes* to each person you are leading, unless they have a copy already
4. Provide an opportunity for everyone to voice hopes and prayers for the weeks ahead

B. Overall Session Schedule

Make Introductions

Get to know one another to the degree you believe best for a first meeting. If you already know one another quite well, then this step may not be necessary.

Distribute the Premarital Material

If you are providing the *Catching Foxes* material, then now may be a good time to hand them and briefly overview the book.

Overview the Premarital Process

It may be helpful to the couple you are leading to share a little bit about the premarital counseling process, including how the material will be used in your meetings, tentative structure to your meetings, and how often you plan to meet before their wedding day.

Identify Their Desires and Goals

Identify what the couple prays to receive from the marriage preparation process (feel free to write them below). Are their specific reasons they are

seeking help or guidance in their preparation for marriage?

a.

b.

c.

Answer Pressing Questions

Provide an opportunity for the couple to ask questions about the marriage preparation process, or anything else they believe to be important at this stage in your meetings.

C. Important Questions to Ask and Conversations to Initiate

- “Please share a little about your relationship, about how you met and why you want to be married.”
- “When do you plan to marry?”
- “Do you have the support of your families, pastors, and church?”
- “Are there any special circumstances of which we should be aware as we begin the premarital counseling process?” (For example, families are strongly opposed to their marriage; getting married because of pregnancy; currently living together; serious illness or disease; drug addiction; violence in the relationship, etc. The reason for asking about special circumstances will not be to address or resolve these in a first meeting, but to give opportunity for these potential issues to be placed out in the open.)

D. Important Parameters to Establish

I don't want you to think there is only one way to help a couple prepare for marriage. This leader's guide does not aim to give you a long list of do's and don'ts. The Lord has probably given you a unique set of gifts and a particular style for premarital counseling. At the same time, the couple or couples you are helping will bring their own unique gifts and style to the process. Not every couple needs to talk about exactly the same things in exactly the same way. I do think, however, there can be parameters around the process that will help you and those you are serving make the most of your time together.

1. Meeting attendance and completing assignments

Obviously some degree of commitment to premarital meetings and chapter assignments will be required if suitable preparation for marriage is to be made. It may be worthwhile to emphasize this with the couple you are leading. It may not be obvious to them. Like other important pursuits in this lifetime, your couple will receive from the study and journey in proportion to what they invest through their time, energy, and humble prayer.

2. Openness, honesty, and grace

It will also be important for the couple you are leading to be open and honest during marriage preparation with you. Of course there may be a few areas where they hold back, especially in the early going, but the degree to which you can help, exhort, and pray for your couple will probably be proportional to the genuineness and transparency with which they approach this process.

3. Cohabitation and sexual purity

The age and culture in which we live prides itself upon individual freedoms and indulgence. The area of cohabitation and sexual pleasure is no exception. In fact, many voices around of our age *recommended* couples live together for a season in order to establish whether or not they are truly compatible for marriage. Of course the Lord disagrees with this kind of thinking. I believe a healthy preparation for marriage requires a commitment to sexual purity.

To begin with, sexual purity honors Jesus Christ and the marriage covenant. We could pursue it for this reason alone. At the same time, it expresses the extent of a man and woman's maturity in Christ and satisfaction in His fellowship. Walking in sexual purity also helps couples examine their motives for marriage with a clearer mind. The experience of sexual pleasures before marriage gives the illusion of love and commitment when neither actually exists. When we actually love people in Christ, we won't actively tempt them to sin, harm their communion with the Lord, and participate with them in activities that are destructive to their soul.

Now, many couples you counsel will probably struggle in this area. And I think you want them to be honest when they are. Sometimes you will need to ask them to define exactly how they are struggling. Different men and women will define "struggle" in quite different ways. If you think it would helpful, you may want to speak with your pastors about what kinds of sexual indulgence deserve what kinds of responses from you as you counsel them.

If they are attracted to one another and excited about sex in marriage, then I think that is a good thing. But biblical love keeps sexual desire in its proper place and proportion. The bride of Solomon emphasized it. “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the hinds of the field, that you do not arouse or awaken my love until she pleases.” (Song of Sol. 2:7)

4. Communication with church pastors and elders

The information you gather from and discuss with couples in premarital counseling should be treated with great respect and care. I think it will be important to extend a degree of privacy and confidence to the couple you are serving when it comes to handling their stories and circumstances. At the same time, there should be limits to that privacy and confidence. The pastor who will be officiating the ceremony and any other leaders who are responsible to shepherd the couple you counsel will need to have some kind of communication with you as the marriage preparation process unfolds.

SESSION 1: TELLING YOUR STORY

Main Point: Everyone enters marriage with personal history. Understanding this history can matter, because it gives us a sense of trajectory in our lives. It can help us see where we come from and where we may be going. The Word of God gives us a framework for understanding our past as well as the grace of God in Jesus Christ for the present. Even more, the gospel can guide our steps into the future.

A. Session Objectives

1. Hear the story of their relationship in more detail.
2. Hear their testimonies in more detail. Establish a clearer sense of their faith in Jesus Christ and how their understanding of the gospel shapes their daily lives.
3. Identify any regrets, sins, and relationships of the past that may continue to control and entangle their hearts and relationship in present time.

B. Overall Session Schedule

<i>Prayer</i>	Ask God to grant clarity in discussing what matters from the past, boldness to bring to light whatever might be necessary from their history, and hope in the gospel for the future.
<i>Share the Highlights</i>	Give the man and woman you are leading an opportunity to hit the parts of chapter 1 that seemed most relevant and important to them.
<i>Open Discussion</i>	Where you or the couple you are leading can ask questions, pursue ideas that arose during the session so far, or pursue pressing issues not addressed in the chapter.
<i>Prayer</i>	Share burdens, concerns, and desires and close your time in prayer together.

C. Potentially Important Questions to Ask

- “Are there any events, sins, relationships, or people from the past to which you still feel entangled or enslaved?”

- “Is there anything your fiancée has shared from his or her past that disturbs you, or concerns you for your future together?”
- “Are there any areas of your life where the forgiveness of God in Jesus Christ needs to be received, trusted, and celebrated?”
- “Are there any areas of your fiancée’s life to which you need to extend grace to him or her because of Jesus Christ and His atoning work on the cross?”

D. What If?

One can never know exactly what difficulties, topics, or questions will arise from one premarital meeting to the next. So we cannot possibly cover everything here and now. We can, however, talk about a couple of possible scenarios and how you might generally respond with wise counsel.

What if one member of the engaged couple is a believer and the other is a non-believer?

If it becomes clear that the couple you are helping toward marriage is, in the words of some people, “unequally yoked,” then you will need to involve a minister or two from your church. In particular, you will need to involve the minister who agreed to officiate their wedding. In a gentle way, it will be important for you to communicate to the couple your concerns for moving forward because Scripture teaches those who live by faith in Jesus Christ are to marry within the faith (1 Cor. 7:39). Two non-believers can marry one another. A believer, on the other hand, has been instructed by Scripture to marry only a fellow believer.

When Abraham determined it was time for Isaac (his begotten son by Sarah) to marry, he sent his oldest and most trusted servant to find a bride for his son. He made his servant “swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth” (Gen. 24:3) that he would not take a bride from the Canaanites, who were outside the covenant. Abraham charged his servant, “you shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, but will go my country and to my relatives, and take a wife for my son Isaac.” (Gen. 24:3-4)

The Mosaic law forbid marriage to those outside the faith. “Watch yourself that you make no covenant with the inhabitants of the land into which you are going, or it will become a snare in your midst... and you might take some of his daughters for your sons, and his daughters might play the harlot with their gods and cause your sons also to play the harlot with their gods.” (Exod. 34:12, 16) “Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons.” (Deut. 7:3)

Samson saw a woman of the Philistines and wanted to take her as a wife. His father and mother challenged his decision, “Is there no woman among the daughters of your relatives, or among all our people, that you go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines.” (Judg. 14:3) Samson foolishly disregarded the guidance of his father, which served to further highlight Samson’s overall approach to life.

In the time of Ezra, the people of Israel intermarried with unbelievers. “For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has intermingled with the peoples of the lands.” (Ezra 9:2) When Ezra heard this, look at what he did and said. “I tore my garment and my robe, and pulled some of the hair from my head and my beard, and sat down appalled.” (Ezra 9:3)

The Old Testament sets a strong precedent for believing people to marry within the faith. The New Testament continues the theme. Listen to how the apostle Paul instructed the Corinthian church. “Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?” (2 Cor. 6:14-15) The specific context addresses a believer’s connection to false teachers. The general principle, however, can be applied to any number of *partnerships* and *covenants* that bind a believer to an unbeliever, such as marriage.

It may be helpful to carefully read through one or two of these passages with the couple you are serving. Grace and tenderness will be important. Try not to rush, but invite the couple to ask questions and share thoughts as you go. Ultimately, they will need to meet with their pastor or the minister who planned to marry them for the final call.

What if there are deep regrets, emotional ties, or other entanglements to past relationships?

I think this question highlights a value of premarital counseling. Good premarital counseling asks these kinds of questions and can help couples talk, pray, and walk through past relationships that may be exacting a toll in the present.

Firstly, deep regrets, emotional ties, and other entanglements should at least be acknowledged. If either member of the couple has been sexually intimate with someone in the past, or engaged to marry someone else in the past, or continues to carry deep regrets or feelings for someone from their past, then the matter will deserve some time and prayer during the marriage preparation process. You may not be able to achieve perfect closure in those relationships, but past sins can be confessed before the Lord and one another, ongoing emotional ties can be severed, and any wrongs committed can be forgiven.

Perhaps one member of the couple has been married in the past. Perhaps one member of the couple will be bringing a child from a previous relationship into the marriage and will continue to have some degree of contact with their child’s other parent.

There are not quick and easy answers to these types of situations, but they still need attention. Feel free to pray through these concerns together. Feel free to seek wisdom from the Word together. You can help them learn what it means to depend on the Lord's grace, walk in the Spirit's power, and handle such situations with wisdom from God through His Word.

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SESSION 2: THE REASON FOR EVERYTHING, EVEN MARRIAGE

Main point: “The greatest preparation for marriage happens in your heart toward God. He created you to glorify and enjoy Him forever. Through your life He intends to display the glory of His grace so that the whole universe can join in praising the glory of His grace.” (*Catching Foxes*, p. 43) You have been redeemed to this end. One of the greatest passions and activities you can bring into marriage will be seeking God above all things.

A. Session Objectives

1. Review their reading and responses to questions from chapter 2 of *Catching Foxes*
2. Express and emphasize the reason for all things: to display and worship the glory of God
3. Show how a vision for marriage bigger than marriage serves marriage well

B. Overall Session Schedule

<i>Prayer</i>	Open your time together in prayer, asking that God would grant humble hearts, a clearer vision of His beauty and splendor, and the wisdom to see marriage the way He sees marriage.
<i>Interact With the Material</i>	Ask the couple to share any aspects of the chapter that seemed most relevant to them. What parts were the most challenging to understand, or accept, or apply to their lives?
<i>Address Additional Questions or Concerns</i>	They may have questions or concerns that do not arise directly from chapter 2, and it may be helpful to take some time discussing these questions and concerns. For example, the groom’s mother may have called him on the phone over the weekend and shared a strong objection to them getting married. Or perhaps they crossed some lines sexually, or maybe one of them is facing significant medical problems. Again, the session schedule can always change as you deem best.

Prayer

Spend a little time sharing areas of praise, thanksgiving, and needed prayer or intercession. Then spend some time praying through these areas of praise and supplication.

C. Potentially Important Questions to Ask

- “Where there any particular points of questions from the chapter that concerned you or confused you?”
- “Is your view of God in all of life growing?”
- “Has anything happened or come up in the past week or two that we should probably be aware of?”

NOTES:

SESSION 3: UNDERSTANDING WHO YOU ARE

Main point: “Another step in a healthy preparation for marriage involves a growing understanding of yourself and other people. It helps to know where you have come from, who you are in Jesus Christ, and where you are going. Since you do not exist in a vacuum, but fit somewhere in God’s eternal plan, your heart must be prepared by His word and Spirit to see yourself more clearly and biblically. This will help you approach marriage more clearly and biblically.” (Catching Foxes, p. 45)

A. Session Objectives

1. Help your couple begin to develop a *biblical anthropology*. That is, promote a view of themselves and human life based upon God’s word, not man’s opinion
2. Seek Scripture to begin answering the questions, “Why do we think, feel, and act the way we do?” and “How to we grow and change for the better?”

B. Overall Session Schedule

<i>Prayer</i>	Open in prayer, thanking the Lord for His faithfulness in your lives and asking God to help you grasp His Word for understanding who you are and where your life is going
<i>Interact With the Material</i>	Ask the couple to share aspects of the chapter that seemed helpful and encouraging for them. What parts were the most challenging to understand, or accept, or apply to their lives?
<i>Address Additional Questions or Concerns</i>	They may have questions or concerns that do not arise directly from chapter 3, and it may be helpful to take some time discussing these questions and concerns. For example, The strains or frustrations of wedding planning may have reached a peak, or they are struggling with sexual purity. Again, the session schedule can always change when necessary.

Prayer

If you would like to close in prayer, then feel free, but I also want to encourage you to pray with your couple during your meetings if you perceive a need. If the bride starts weeping over the stresses of wedding preparation halfway through your meeting, then it may be a good opportunity to seek the Lord for comfort and peace as a group.

C. Taking Their Pulse

It may be hard to imagine, but at this point you have completed 25% of the 12 pre-wedding chapters. The couple you are serving may be less than 3 months from their wedding day. Today may be a good time to check in with them to discern how they are progressing as a whole. Are they overwhelmed? Are they frustrated or exhausted? Are they energetic, excited, enthusiastic, and delighted? Are they learning? Are they pleased with how the Lord is preparing them? Are they discouraged? Have family members created additional burden and pain? Have people been pushing or pressuring them to hurry, or slow down, and break up? Are their big fears that have started to arise in their hearts? Guilt or shame?

I ask these questions to encourage you, as the leading couple, to not get so focused on covering the *Catching Foxes* material or teaching what you believe to be important that you actually lose touch with the man and woman you are helping. The couple you are helping may volunteer insight into trials or hardships they are facing. Or you may have to really draw it out. They may be easy to read. Or they may require a lot of your attention to know what challenges they are facing day to day.

Do their answers to discussion questions sound academic or detached? Are they so focused on giving *the right answers* that they are not giving honest answers, or interacting with Jesus Christ and His word in a personal way? Are they afraid of what you may think if they are honest? Do you see anything they may be avoiding? Are their schedules so full that they are cramming marriage preparation into little pockets of time late at night and beginning to resent the process?

These are just a few questions to help you assess the overall trajectory they are assuming toward their wedding day. You don't have to ask any of them if you don't think they matter right now. Save them for later, or consider each one in turn.

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SESSION 4: UNDERSTANDING WHAT MARRIAGE IS REALLY ABOUT

Main Point: “A healthy preparation for marriage requires you to grow your understanding of what marriage is really about according to God’s design and intention. Marriage originates with God who determined it, created it, and assembled its essential parts. God formed marriage between a husband and wife to display His glory, especially the glory of Christ and the church. Marriage offers a visible, living picture of God’s redeeming love. In a related way, marriage provides a means to expand the kingdom of Christ by producing children and training them to love God and further His kingdom purposes. Through marriage God grants to you a suitable companion for your life on earth, someone to help you become less self-absorbed and more oriented to another, someone for God to use in conforming you to the image of Jesus Christ.” (*Catching Foxes*, p. 74)

A. Session Objectives

1. Highlight the particular purpose of marriage as a display and celebration of Christ and the Church
2. Emphasize God’s ownership of marriage and the implications of this ownership for our approach to and enjoyment of marriage

B. Overall Session Schedule

Prayer Thank Him for the gift of marriage. Thank Him for the gift of Christ. Ask that God would provide a clear, positive, and hopeful view of marriage as a unique picture of Christ and the Church, and that He would enable you to honor this glorious gift.

Interact With the Material Ask the couple to share any aspects of chapter 4 that helped, convicted, stretched, or encouraged them. What parts seemed most contrary to what they had been taught in the past?

Prayer Spend a little time sharing areas of praise, thanksgiving, and needed prayer or intercession. Then spend some time praying through these areas of praise and supplication.

C. Marriage Is To Be Deeply Enjoyed

Whenever I emphasize the ultimate goal of marriage with people, as a display of Christ and the church to the glory of God, I sometimes find people get a little deflated. That is, such a view seems too lofty, or it somehow loses value and excitement for human life on earth. The pleasures of romance, the excitement about sex, and the vast and varied benefits of having a life companion seem to get trampled upon by such a “spiritual” and “God’s-glory-oriented” paradigm. Of course, I think these are mostly misunderstandings, or my failure to articulate well, or a signal that we need to keep talking out the implications of a marriage-for-the-glory-of-God view.

I would argue that seeing marriage as a picture of Christ and the church, and living out marriage for the glory of God actually *maximizes* romance, sexual pleasure, and the vast and varied benefits of having a life companion. God seeks our true good. God knows how to give good gifts to His children (Luke 11:9-13; Matt. 7:7-11). Using created things to serve the purposes to which God designed all created things will always increase our enjoyment of both God and created things. I believe this can be said of oxygen, mountains, wine, cars, sex, clothing, money, and just about everything else. Accepting, using, and employing the gifts of God the way He intends will always maximize our enjoyment of God and His gifts.

A man-centered, need-based approach to marriage, I believe, *minimizes* our actual enjoyment of marriage. We will spend much of our married lives disappointed and frustrated, even downright enraged, if we use marriage as something primarily about us. It isn’t built to feed my personal appetites or serve my glory.

I think we must receive and utilize the gift as the Giver and Maker designed it. Use a Ferrari to sail across the ocean and you won’t enjoy the Ferrari or the ocean. You won’t travel more than 5 meters before sinking to the bottom. The car isn’t built for the ocean, nor is the ocean for the car. The operating manual may not say this directly, but once we read it cover to cover, we should sit down quite convinced the car is meant for driving on a road.

I only say this to alert you to the possible need to answer this concern with the couple you are leading. It may be important to emphasize just how much fun marriage can be, especially when understood and practiced as part of God’s overall mission in the world.

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SESSION 5: THE COVENANT OF MARRIAGE

Main Point: “There are a number of covenants presented in the Scripture involving God and mankind. Marriage is one of them. The covenant of marriage involves an agreement between a man and woman to hold fast to one another, by the grace of God, as husband and wife during their earthly lives. ‘What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.’ (Mark 10:9) It provides a beautiful, visible picture of the glorious, invisible covenant between Christ and His Bride, the Church. We should take the covenant very seriously, just as God does.

What we cannot try to do, however, is keep the covenant of marriage through our self-righteous works. We are sinners. Our best efforts to keep the Law cannot redeem and transform us. It can highlight the truth of our sinfulness, but it cannot save and sanctify us... We are saved and sanctified by His grace alone. Our marriages are forged, nurtured, and grown by grace alone. Law suffocates. Grace breathes life. Law produces despair and death. Grace produces hope and life.” (*Catching Foxes*, p. 91-92)

A. Session Objectives

1. Define the meaning of a covenant in Scripture, and why we should take covenants seriously
2. Emphasize our need for the grace of God and the power of His Spirit if we are to keep our marriage vows and fulfill the marriage covenant

B. Overall Session Schedule

Prayer

Open in prayer, thanking the Lord for His covenant faithfulness to His covenant people across the whole of human history. Express awe for the beauty and privilege of marriage. What an incredible act of grace from our God to even let us partake of it.

Interact With the Material

Explore aspects of the chapter that seemed especially relevant to the couple you are leading. What parts were the most challenging to understand, or accept, or apply to their lives?

Address Additional Questions or Concerns

They may have questions or concerns that do not arise directly from chapter 5, and it may be helpful to take some time discussing these questions and concerns.

Prayer

Close in prayer. Perhaps take some time to gather requests for prayer for anyone in the group. Share a few areas where you would appreciate the other couple praying for you

D. Any Fears Aroused?

Whenever a Christ-exalting and God-centered perspective of the marriage covenant begins to develop in our hearts, pressures and fears about marriage can grow. The gravity of the commitment might magnify. The weight of responsibility can sway us to avoid the whole thing. After Jesus Christ expressed the divine and serious nature of the marriage covenant in Matthew 19, his disciples responded, “If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry.”¹ Jesus didn’t refute them. The disciples got His point. A marriage covenant is no small thing. “What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.” (Matt. 19:6)

The couple you are counseling may start seeing marriage as something precious, like a grandmother’s priceless antique vase. They’re afraid of dropping it. This is good. Wedding vows shouldn’t be taken flippantly. At the same time, they may need to hear some reassurance from you concerning the grace of God and the power of His Spirit. He’ll never leave or forsake them (Heb. 13:5b-6). He will help and strengthen them (Isa. 41:10). If He is for them, who will be against them? (Rom. 8:31) I’m not saying God promises to make all our marriages work just the way we want, but that He will always fulfill the promises He has given.

A number of other passages and comforts may come to your mind. Please feel free to write them down and share them with the couple you are counseling if needed.

E. Any Grief, Guilt, or Shame Aroused?

Other potential responses to a chapter on the covenant of marriage are grief, guilt, or shame. Namely, if either member of the couple has been married and divorced in the past, then they might, in reading such a chapter, experience the weight, grief, or disgrace of a failed marriage. Were they sexually unfaithful to their former spouse, or did they abandon their spouse, or did they otherwise sinfully divorce their former mate? It may be

¹ Matt. 19:10

time to seek God, repent, dwell on the gospel, and receive forgiveness in Jesus Christ. Then it may be time to determine whether or not they are truly free to marry.

Are there confessed sins still lingering from their previous marriage? Perhaps they are free to remarry, but still carry the guilt or shame of wrongdoing. Now would be a great time to meditate on the gospel. Does their conscience need quieting by believing what God has spoken? Maybe their spouse committed adultery, refused to repentant and reconcile, divorced them, and married their lover. Yet they still feel the weight of guilt and feel ashamed for pursuing marriage at all. Do they need comfort from the Scripture concerning their freedom to marry?

I don't know if you will face any of these questions. These questions and ideas are here to help you just in case.

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SESSION 6: BECOMING A HUSBAND

Main point: “What a privilege husbands have been given in marriage, to reflect Christ by their joyful, benevolent self-sacrifice for the eternal good of their brides and the glory of their God! Marriage exists, foremost, to help tell the story of Christ and His church. A multitude of delights come alongside, but they are not the ultimate reasons for marriage... You cannot fulfill your calling as a husband in your own strength. The road is too long and the task too difficult. Dependence on the Spirit will be essential. Only by His grace will you glorify and enjoy your God in marriage and love your wife just as Christ also loved the church.” (*Catching Foxes*, p. 110-111)

A. Session Objectives

1. Highlight the privilege of being a husband, and the serious responsibility it brings alongside
2. Present the basic roles of a husband, and how they fit into God's design for marriage to reflect Christ and the church
3. Emphasize a husband's essential need for the Holy Spirit to help, strengthen, and guide over time

B. Overall Session Schedule

<i>Prayer</i>	Open in prayer, thanking the Lord for all His gifts that come to mind, especially the gift of Himself in the gospel
<i>Interact With the Material</i>	Explore aspects of the chapter that seemed especially relevant to the couple you are leading. This will involve a specific focus on the husband-to-be and his answers to the questions in chapter 6
<i>Address Additional Questions or Concerns</i>	They may have questions or concerns that do not arise directly from chapter 6, and it may be helpful to take some time discussing these questions and concerns.
<i>Prayer</i>	Close in prayer, asking the Lord to enable His sons to love their wives just as Christ also loved the church. Ask Him to impress upon the minds of men a truly biblical view of

masculinity and what it means to be men after His own heart

C. Potentially Important Questions to Ask

- Who have been the significant men in your life, and how have they influenced who you are today?
- How do you tend to respond to challenging responsibilities and weighty commitments? Do you see them through until the end? Do you tackle them in your own strength? Do you tend to run and avoid?
- According to the people and messages from your past and present life, what does it mean to be a man in marriage? How do you believe God distinguishes you from your wife? In what ways are you designed to be different from her?

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SESSION 7: BECOMING A WIFE

Main point: “What a gift wives have been given in marriage, to express their devotion to Jesus Christ through their attitude and manner toward their respective husbands! The heart of a wife toward her husband is always an expression of her heart toward Jesus Christ. Marriage provides a stage upon which God tells the awesome story of Christ and the church... The glorious role of a wife is so serious and substantial that no woman can possibly achieve it apart from the grace of God. Her role requires the *joyful honoring of her husband’s will and position empowered by the Holy Spirit that has as its aim the eternal fruitfulness of her husband for the glory of her God*. It is an impossible task. Only by walking in the Holy Spirit can any wife respect and honor her husband *as to the Lord*. She must learn to hope in God, not herself. She must learn to hope in God, not her husband.” (Catching Foxes, p. 129-130)

A. Session Objectives

1. Highlight the privilege and joy of being a wife, as well as a few potential difficulties.
2. Present the biblical role of a wife in marriage, and her great need for God’s grace in fulfilling it
3. Show the pattern of headship and submission in the Godhead (as a glorious reality) and how the roles of marriage and their positioning originates in the nature of our God

B. Overall Session Schedule

Prayer

Spend some time in prayer together, praising God for His grace in Jesus Christ and thanking Him for His word. Ask Him to help each of you set aside the worries and strains of the day in order to focus on Him, His Word, and this time together

Interact With the Material

Explore aspects of the chapter that seemed especially relevant to the couple you are leading. This will involve a specific focus on the wife-to-be and her answers to the questions in chapter 7

*Address Additional Questions
or Concerns*

Take some time to check in with your couple to see how they are doing as a whole. Have there been any hardships, events, or concerns they want to discuss

Prayer

Close in prayer, asking the Lord to enable His daughters to honor and respect their husbands as to the Lord. Ask Him to impress upon the minds of women a truly biblical and beautiful view of femininity

C. Potentially Important Questions to Ask

- Who have been the significant women in your life, and how have they influenced who you are today?
- How do you tend to respond to challenging responsibilities and weighty commitments? Do you see them through until the end? Do you tackle them in your own strength? Do you tend to run and avoid?
- According to the people and messages from your past and present life, what does it mean to be a woman in marriage? How do you believe God distinguishes you from your husband? In what ways are you designed to be different from him?

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SESSION 8: UNDERSTANDING MARRIAGE CONFLICT

Main point: Every marriage invites some degree of conflict. When two sinners join together for earthly life, there will be a clash of agendas and desires. The main reason we fight flows from selfish desires waging war in our souls. Marital fighting does not begin with poor communication, or differing personalities, or external pressures. It begins with hearts deeply committed to their own passions and glory, rather than God's. Whatever rules our hearts will also rule our lives. Only by the grace of God can we overcome the fleshly desires waging war against our souls. Only by His Spirit ruling our souls will our marriages take on the nature and beauty of Christ and the church.

A. Session Objectives

1. Teach the Bible's perspective of conflict in relationships. Stress the principle, "Whatever rules our hearts will rule our lives"
2. Alert the couple to the most common expressions of conflict in marriage, and identify the particular expressions to which they are most disposed

B. Overall Session Schedule

<i>Prayer</i>	I think prayer can be a helpful means to transition our hearts and minds from self-focus to God-focus, from worldly worries to godly desires, and from concern for my kingdom to concern for His kingdom. It may be a great time to pray through Jesus' prayer in Matt. 6:9-13
<i>Interact With the Material</i>	Explore aspects of chapter 8 that seemed especially relevant to the couple you are leading. Did any significant convictions, questions, or encouragements arise?
<i>Address Additional Questions or Concerns</i>	Take some time to check in with your couple to see how they are doing as a whole. Have there been any hardships, events, or concerns they want to discuss
<i>Wedding Check-in & prayer</i>	It may be a good time, if you haven't already, to check in on their wedding preparations. It could be equally encouraging to spend some time in prayer for the wedding day and the family members who will be involved

C. Potentially Important Questions to Ask

- Have any significant conflicts arisen in your relationship that stood out to you when you read this chapter?
- Talk about the expressions of conflict to which you seem most prone
- If you don't have any conflict, is it for good reasons, like the exercise of love, patience, and humility? Or is it because you fear conflict, avoid tense conversations, and prefer to pretend everything is okay even if it isn't?

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SESSION 9: RESOLVING MARRIAGE CONFLICT BIBLICALLY

Main point: Fighting in our relationships happens when our proud hearts go to war with one another. It is not so much a clash of differences, but a clash of kingdoms. We don't need to be more alike in all our opinions. We don't need to learn to agree on everything. We need our hearts submitted to the kingdom of God, deeply satisfied in Jesus Christ, and learning to love one another just as He loves us. Repentance needs to happen often. Forgiveness will be required on a regular basis. Living life together as ambassadors for Christ and ministers of the gospel will be your greatest safeguard against senseless and futile disputes.

A. Session Objectives

1. Offer the Scripture's approach to resolving conflict in marriage, namely the power of the gospel and the Holy Spirit ruling the hearts of people
2. Talk about repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation as a way of life in our lives and marriages

B. Overall Session Schedule

Prayer Pray for hearts to pursue genuine peace and unity in marriage. Ask God to equip you in being ministers of reconciliation in all your relationships

Interact With the Material Talk about the material from chapter 9. What statements and questions really stood out to the couple you are leading

Prayer Close in prayer, asking God to fill the world with the gospel of peace He has given to us in Jesus Christ. Spend some time praising Him for being so good, a God so good that He would pursue and make peace with His people at great cost to Himself

C. Potentially Important Questions to Ask

- Do you have a history of resolving conflicts well?
- Has there ever been any hint of violence or physical aggression in your relationship?

- Have your conflicts ever turned emotionally nasty, where one or both of you are saying cruel things, trying to manipulate one another, or using ruthless tactics to control the other person?

D. Violence

On rare occasion, a couple preparing for marriage will be engaged in disturbing kinds of relational conflict where emotional punishment, physical aggression, or other means of manipulation and control take place. I'm sure you know this, but I will say it anyway. Conflicts of this nature are extremely serious and deserve immediate attention.

In fact, any engaged couple already exhibiting these dynamics cannot and should not proceed any further toward marriage. If their conflicts become so heated that physical posturing, threats, or aggression take place, then neither person should be considering marriage at the moment. Simply getting married will not resolve their troubles. Marriage is more likely to enhance them over time, not alleviate them.

This section is not being provided so that you can counsel couples out from cycles of violence. Rather, this section aims to increase your awareness about the possibility of violence among couples engaged to marry, alert you to the seriousness of the problem when present, and equip you with a few questions to ask in order to enlist the help of leaders in your church community. I want to help you love them well. I want to help you confront potentially destructive patterns in their relationship, when necessary, in a gentle and compassionate manner, in order to guide them toward the help they need.

Ask gentle, direct questions. I don't believe it is loving or productive to dance around big issues during premarital counseling. In my experience, humble men and women don't get offended when you ask the kinds of questions to follow, especially when asked by people who care about them. Only proud people clinging to a veil of self-righteousness tend to get offended, which you would want to know about anyway. To most people preparing for marriage, these questions tend to make sense.

- Has there ever been physical aggression in your relationship? Like grabbing, pulling, hitting, throwing objects, kicking, etc?
- Have either one of you ever been in a violent relationship?
- Do either of you try to intimidate or threaten the other in order to get what you want?
- Are there ways you punish your fiancée if they don't do what you want them to do?
- Are you ever tempted to control the thoughts, emotions, and actions of your fiancée, perhaps when you're afraid, or angry, or want something badly?

If violence exists, talk about it. If it becomes evident that the man and woman you are leading to marriage have engaged in physically threatening or aggressive behavior, then it will be helpful to get a few details. Ask them to describe two or three situations when it escalated. Couples caught in these kinds of cycles tend to be vague when talking about their conflicts. They tend to minimize the problem. Help them use clear and vivid language that gives an honest picture. Encourage them to be specific.

For example: “You said, ‘Then I Nudged her.’ What exactly do you mean, ‘nudged her?’” “When you threatened him, what exactly did you say?” “How many times have you laid hands on him in anger?” “Try to call the moment back to mind. Where you just talking loud, or screaming? Did you just touch her shoulders to calm her down, or did you actually grab her with intensity?” “What precisely did you say and do next?” “Who else knows these kinds of conflicts have occurred in your relationship and what have you told them?”

Talk to them about next steps. Once you gather the kind of information and detail we have just discussed, the next step will be to gain help from your church community. Namely, the pastor who plans to officiate their wedding needs to be involved, and maybe parents, and maybe even the legal authorities if the situation warrants (I have encountered situations where the violence between dating couples deserved the immediate attention of the police). You don’t need to say all this right out of the gate. I think your pastor(s) and the couple can make the final call on those kinds of decisions. The physical violence, however, cannot remain a secret. It must be dealt with in a loving, decisive way.

Here might be something you could say. “Thank you both for sharing what you have. We grieve with you and for you. We believe you did the absolutely right thing in bringing this to the light. Now the Lord can bring repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing where He pleases. Keeping it quiet would have only made it worse. Bringing it to the open, no matter what happens, gives the best opportunity for God-honoring change. Of course, we can’t do this alone. Pastor _____ and/or a couple of the church Elders need to be brought up to speed and involved. It may be best for the four of us to find a time when we can all sit down together with him and anyone else we all think should be present. Who else comes to mind that you think should be aware?”

There’s no exact formula. Pray fervently! Ask the Lord to grant His wisdom and discernment for navigating such difficult and uncertain waters. Take it seriously, but also convey hope for change and restoration. These kinds of situations, by the grace of God, remain quite rare, especially among Christian couple seeking premarital guidance through the body of Christ.

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SESSION 10: THE GLORY OF CHRIST IN SEXUAL UNION

Main point: “A marriage covenant between a husband and wife is consummated, or completed, by sexual union... God-honoring sexual union happens between one man and one woman, within the marriage covenant, as an expression of faith and worship toward God. It offers an intimate expression and enjoyment of the marriage covenant. It symbolizes a man’s departure from his family of origin in order to be joined to his wife. ‘A man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.’ (Gen. 2:24)

Sexual union during the years of marriage does not make the marriage. It does, however, express a marriage. It encourages the marriage. It offers a unique form of physical pleasure in marriage. It is an expression of love and service in marriage. Above all else, sexual union provides a wonderfully visible, temporal, one-flesh picture of the invisible, eternal, one-spirit reality of Christ and His church. It is an extremely important aspect of marriage.” (*Catching Foxes*, p. 166)

A. Session Objectives

1. Present a Christ-centered, pure, and delightful view of sexual union from the Scripture
2. Alert the couple to the various threats to the joy of their sexual union and possible difficulties they could face

B. Overall Session Schedule

Prayer

Give glory to God for His purity and righteousness. Thank Him for keeping you from completely destroying yourself through sexual sin. Ask that He would provide the wisdom and freedom to talk about this important and sacred aspect of marriage in a fruitful manner

Interact With the Material

Explore aspects of the chapter that seemed especially relevant to the couple you are leading. What questions, concerns, and joys did it bring to the surface? What fears and worries? What hopes and expectations?

*Address Additional Questions
or Concerns*

Take some time to check in with your couple to see how they are doing as a whole. Have there been any hardships, events, or concerns they want to discuss

Prayer

Close in prayer, asking the Lord to grant perseverance in purity to the wedding day and beyond. Plead for His vision of sexual union in marriage, a vision so splendid and lovely that we would dare not despise it, but rather enjoy and celebrate it

C. Sexual Abuse from the Past

It could be that one or both members of the couple you are leading experienced some kind of sexual abuse in their history. It will be important for you to ask the question directly. “Have either one of you ever faced sexual abuse or molestation or harassment in the past?” The answer may be no, or it could be yes. If their answer is yes, then there’s no need to panic. God knows what to do. God knows how to help you. The grace of God is sufficient to strengthen and guide you through the conversations to follow.

In their estimation, the experience of abuse might have been quite mild. A neighborhood friend rubbed inappropriately against them in the back yard on two or three occasions. Or it may have been quite extreme. An uncle forced them to perform oral sex or an older brother molested them over a period of years. To the degree your couple is comfortable sharing, it will be a good idea to find out what happened. If you get the impression something quite awful and vicious happened, but he or she is unwilling to talk about it, then let it serve as a signal that additional guidance should be sought (pastoral or professional in nature and thoroughly biblical).

Be sober, but not dramatic. Being mistreated and harmed through sexual sin is serious, and God’s power and grace to heal is even more serious. Their suffering may go deep, but the tender mercies of God plunge deeper still. They are not scarred for life. They are not damaged goods. While the experience of abuse influences and affects us, it does not determine who we are and where the Lord will take us. There are whole Psalms written from the depths of persecution and abuse, and those same Psalms provide a way to think, feel, and live in response to those hardships of human life in the face of God (e.g. Psalm 3, 5, 11, 22, 41, 46).

Try to listen, not fix. Begin with careful and patient listening in response to their story of sexual abuse. Please don’t take the responsibility to alleviate, remove, or fix their burden. You can help them carry the burden through prayer, encouragement toward God, and a willingness to walk with them over time.

Ask meaningful questions. Feel free to ask questions to better understand their story and how they deal with their past in the here-and-now. Here are a few examples:

- “Have you received counseling in the past to address the abuse? If so, how did it help?”
- “To what degree do you believe your experience of abuse affects you today?”
- “In what way do you believe it will affect your marriage?”
- “Where does your relationship stand today with the offender? Was there repentance and any kind of reconciliation? Have you forgiven their wickedness against you?”
- “Do you harbor any bitterness toward people who were involved, or toward God?”
- “How do you believe we can help you prepare for marriage in light of what you have shared?”

Comfort with truths of the gospel. The gospel of Jesus Christ is good news to those who suffer and to those who sin. It tells the story of God's compassion for the afflicted. “Comfort, O comfort My people, says your God. Speak kindly to Jerusalem.” (Isa. 40:1-2a). The cross of Jesus Christ proves just how seriously our heavenly Father views and deals with sin. He will deal with all sins committed against His people, whether through His wrath upon evildoers or the wrath poured out upon His Son (Matt. 12:18-21). The gospel promises deliverance from both earthly and eternal dangers. God promises to be with us and for us under every trial and circumstance (Isa. 41:10).

Seek help, if necessary. Over the course of your meetings, you may come to believe that additional help is needed for your couple in light of their history with sexual abuse. It will be worthwhile to talk about this belief with them before seeking any kind of extra help. You may want to encourage them to bring their pastor or church leaders up to date, or you may encourage the couple to meet with a biblical counselor (professionally licensed or otherwise) for extra encouragement and direction.

D. Helpful Resources

If you are interested in additional reading or helpful resources to pass on to men and women who have suffered under sexual abuse, let me offer a few suggestions.

- *Rid of My Disgrace: Hope and Healing for Victims of Sexual Assault* by Justin & Lindsey Holcomb (2011)
- *Why Me?: Comfort for the Victimized* by David Powlison (2003)
- *Abuse: Finding Hope in Christ* by John Henderson (2012)

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SESSION 11: THE GLORY OF CHRIST IN FINANCIAL STEWARDSHIP

Main point: If you are entering into marriage, then you are about to become a co-steward of the great many resources the Lord will entrust to your household during the years ahead. You cannot think about money as if it's yours, because it isn't, but as God's provision for your enjoyment and His glory. It will be important to steward material resources wisely as an overflow of the gospel in your hearts. "By all means use wise strategies for stewarding the resources God has entrusted to your care. Develop a budget. Get financial guidance. Just remember that these are simply aids to good stewardship. They are not the key. The Spirit of Christ ruling your souls will be the key." (*Catching Foxes*, p. 188)

A. Session Objectives

1. Place financial stewardship as an expression of love for God and others, not the key to the health of a marriage
2. Establish the practices of a faithful steward, and how these fit into an overall scale of values or priorities in the Christian life
3. Discuss the couple's history in their use of money and material possessions

B. Overall Session Schedule

<i>Prayer</i>	Thank God for His generosity and provision. Ask that He grant you His purpose for all material things, and the wisdom to steward family resources wisely. Ask that He help you "seek first His kingdom and His righteousness" (Matt. 6:33), that He help you, "store up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Matt. 6:20), and that He help you <i>enjoy</i> His gifts, not <i>worship</i> them.
<i>Interact With the Material</i>	Explore aspects of the chapter that seemed especially relevant to the couple you are leading. What questions, concerns, and joys did it bring to the surface? What fears and worries? What hopes and expectations?
<i>Address Additional Questions or Concerns</i>	Try to leave room in your time together to address events or difficulties or areas of excitement that have arisen in recent days

Prayer

Close in prayer

C. Developing a Budget

Appendix 1 on page 277 of *Catching Foxes* offers an example of a budget outline. The couple may have completed this before your meeting today. If not, it may be a good idea to have them complete it during the days ahead, or at least a similar document. You may be able to find a budget outline you find more helpful. Please feel free to use it. In this area of marriage preparation, I think it helps to be specific and concrete. There will be young people getting married in this day and age who have little to no understanding of how earning and spending money really works.

D. Debt & Financial Responsibility

I firmly believe couples do not need to be wealthy to get married. By wealthy I mean established in a career, without debt, carrying some kind of health insurance, and putting money into savings. Not only do I believe it's okay to be poor and married, I have often wondered if it helps when couples begin their life together on humble, God-dependent ground. When I listen to the stories of couples married 40 years plus, I am amazed to find how many of them spent the early years of marriage living in a small apartment, sharing a car, eating just enough to survive on a modest, single income. Their small closets weren't full of clothes, their pantries weren't full of food, and they seriously considered the cost of gasoline before jumping in the car to run across town. They experienced lean years, but apparently found those years full of delight, sanctification, and strengthening. Marriage under humble circumstances seems far closer to the way most of the people in the world live their entire lives.

At the same time, I firmly believe couples are not ready to be married if they are swimming in debt and, even more importantly, show a track record for frivolous, foolish, and impulsive use of material resources. The latter tends to produce the former. A heart set upon the things of the world and unable to deny its desires for immediate gratification will usually express itself upon the landscape of credit cards and car loans. When I listen to the stories of married couples under the age of 45, I am amazed to hear how many of them maintain their lifestyle with borrowed money and use the resources God has entrusted to their charge for the primary purpose of personal amusement - for regular eating out, staying current with the latest fashion and technology, and driving cars they do not need and cannot afford.

The couple you are helping may be coming from one of two extremes. They may wrongly believe they cannot marry until they have 6 months on living expenses in savings, a stable career, and no debt. Or they may believe they can manage just fine usually material resources foolishly, living on credit cards, and almost half their income going to the payment of debt. You may not know this until you see their budget and hear them talk through their plans.

As you guide couples through the financial aspects of marriage preparation, please be careful to avoid those same two extreme views. On the one extreme, the view that couples should only marry on *solid financial ground* (whatever that means). On the other extreme, the view that the financial condition of the couple doesn't matter. There's nothing wrong with marrying modestly and living modestly. Marrying on the brink of bankruptcy is another thing entirely.

E. Helpful Resources

If you are interested in additional reading or helpful resources to pass on to men and women for thinking biblically about money and developing a budget, here are some suggestions.

- *Treasure Principle* by Randy Alcorn (2005)
- www.crown.org - the website of Crown Ministries, a good resource for practical tools in the use of material resources

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SESSION 12: GETTING A GRIP ON YOUR EXPECTATIONS

Main point: Everyone brings a great many expectations into marriage. I am convinced we cannot avoid this. But do we know the place from where our expectations come? Are we alerted to the desires and longings that birthed them? “All our little expectations have grown from our little desires, and our little desires have their roots in our ultimate Desire.” (*Catching Foxes*, p. 218) Do we desire Christ and His kingdom, or our own? Do we find all our satisfaction, joy, and hope in Him rather than in our spouses and marriages?

The answer to these questions will explain and shape all the expectations we drag into our marriages. God wants to help us discern the difference between expectations arising from our love for Him and longing for His will and expectations arising from baser places, “so that our hearts can become more fully His, so that our selfish desires don’t burn our marriages to the ground, so that we can be free to enjoy our marriages and love your spouses the way God intends. (*Catching Foxes*, p. 218)

A. Session Objectives

1. Make the connection between personal expectations for marriage and the chief desire of our souls. Make the connection between all the little wants and demands we bring to marriage and the ruling kingdom of our hearts
2. Help the couple identify and express some of the specific expectations they are bringing to marriage
3. Begin to prepare for the possibility of expectations being met, or of expectations being shattered

B. Overall Session Schedule

Prayer

With this being your final meeting before the wedding, I think it would be a wonderful time to thank the Lord for all that He has done, and ask for His name to be glorified in the wedding ceremony, and for His will to be done in their marriage ahead.

Interact With the Material

Explore aspects of the chapter that seemed especially relevant to the couple you are leading. What questions, concerns, and joys did it bring to the surface? What fears and worries? What hopes and expectations?

Wedding Thoughts or Questions Spend some time talking about the wedding. Do they believe they are ready? Are they excited? Any terror or fear coming to the surface? Do they have any last minute details or questions they would like to talk through together?

Prayer Close in prayer and worship of God. Celebrate the gift of marriage, and especially the reality of Christ and the Church, the reality which gives marriage is ultimate meaning

C. Open Discussion and Fellowship

It may be encouraging to leave some room at the end of this meeting or following the meeting to simply relax and enjoy one another's company. Sharing stories, talking about interests unrelated to marriage or the wedding, or even playing a card game could be decent options, whatever seems best to you.

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SESSION 13: IN THE WAKE

Main point: Every married couple will have experienced their wedding day and the weeks to follow in their own way. There will be similarities among couples of course, but a great many differences as well. This chapter intends to help a newlywed couple celebrate the particular ceremony and honeymoon the Lord granted to them.

Founding a marriage upon Christ and His Word is vital. The world will offer a great many people and objects around which to revolve a marriage, and these must be resisted. Only Christ and His Word provide the kind of wisdom, love, and power needed to build and enjoy marriage over the long haul.

A. Session Objectives

1. Give an opportunity for your newly wed couple to talk about and celebrate their wedding and marriage
2. Identify aspects of wedding and marriage that went according to plan, and aspects they found surprising or even disappointing
3. If unresolved conflict, hurt, or anger remains, help the couple toward humble repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation
4. Help them see the essential value of building their marriage upon Christ and His Word

B. Overall Session Schedule

<i>Prayer</i>	Praise God for the gift of marriage and the days since the wedding ceremony. Thank Him for the many people who have helped bring them to this point.
<i>Interact With the Material</i>	Explore aspects of chapter 13 they found most relevant, helpful, and convicting. What questions, concerns, and joys did it bring to the surface? What fears and worries? What hopes and expectations?
<i>Wedding Reflections</i>	Spend some time talking about the wedding. Did it go as they have planned? Were any specific expectations crushed? Any wonderful surprises? In what way was Jesus Christ honored? In what way might He have been dishonored? For what moments were they most thankful?

Prayer

Close in prayer and seek His mercy. Pray for God's grace to comfort and guide them during the weeks ahead.

C. Any Significant Hurt or Conflict to Address?

A certain percentage of couples have a dreadful wedding and honeymoon experience. You will want to be aware of this possibility. Extended families can contribute a mixed assortment of joys and pains. Sex can be clumsy, frustrating, or downright terrifying. The honeymoon travels may have run full of mishaps. They may have hurt one another with their words and actions. They may be bringing home an unresolved serious conflict. You can never really know until it you sit with them, ask good questions, and hear them out.

If the couple you are leading does in fact sit across from you at odds with one another, then you will experience first hand the value of premarital discipleship and post-marital follow-up. Now will be the time to pray for them and with them. Now will be the time to help them share their perspectives in respectful tones, repent of pride, selfishness, and sins committed, forgive transgressions they have endured, and sincerely apply the gospel to their marriage relationship. You can help them do this.

If necessary, review chapters 8 and 9 of *Catching Foxes* in order to understand and resolve conflict on biblical ground. Encourage both husband and wife to slow down, assume a humble posture, and trust God to help them navigate their struggles. Help them identify any personal wrongdoing. Help them see where they need to extend grace toward their mate, just as the Lord has been gracious with them. Encourage them to forgive, just as God in Christ Jesus has forgiven them (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13).

Ask them to consider what God is revealing to them about Himself through His Word in the circumstances they face. What is He showing them about themselves and the anatomy of their sin? How is He humbling, exposing, and teaching them amidst trial? (Deut. 8:2-3) Other questions may come to your mind. Please feel free to put them on the table for discussion.

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SESSION 13: REALITY

Main point: “The reality you are coming to see in your marriage may be better or worse than you imagined. Perhaps you approached marriage as some kind of God-given Promised Land, only to find it feels more like a wilderness. Maybe you expected it to be a wilderness, only to find it overflows with milk and honey. Either way, our God provides wisdom and power for dealing with reality. The Exodus narrative is one example of such wisdom. The story, by the grace of God, can help us tackle the painful realities of our marriages with humble resolve and joy. It can help us embrace the unexpected pains of our redemption. It can help us fix our eyes on Jesus Christ. And when we do, the Spirit will conform us to His image. When we do, the Spirit will give us more of Christ and, therefore, more of what marriage has been created to provide.” (*Catching Foxes*, p. 258)

A. Session Objectives

1. Be honest about the joyful and painful realities of marriage that may be setting in at this point
2. Help the couple talk about and embrace any disillusionment they may be facing using the Exodus narrative as a guide
3. Encourage them to see Christ in their daily lives, through His Word, and amidst the details of married life

B. Overall Session Schedule

<i>Prayer</i>	Pray for honesty. Pray for God to give them an appreciation for their sanctification. Pray for His Spirit to help them see Jesus Christ in the Scriptures, and the power of His Word in their daily experiences
<i>Interact With the Material</i>	Explore aspects of chapter 14 that seemed relevant and convicting for the couple you are leading. How did the Exodus narrative minister to them as a couple? What comforts did it provide? What fears or frustrations?
<i>Prayer</i>	Thank God for His patience. Pray that He would grant you His patience for dealing with daily life. Thank God for His power to save and sustain us in times of need. Ask for Him

to impress His Word onto your hearts in order to supply you with practical wisdom.

C. Whose Counsel Do They Hear?

The world counsels us. Everywhere we turn, there's advice. Talk shows offer their brands of wisdom. Movies, music, and art, in one form or another, give a perspective of life and ideas for how to live it well. Friends and family counsel instinctively, whether they know it or not, whether we realize it or not, especially when we're in some kind of trouble.

If disillusionment about marriage has started to happen, or if conflicts have been intense, then I assure you the couple you are helping have probably sought or listened to counsel of some kind. It can't really be avoided. The question is, whose counsel do they seek and hear? To whom are they running for help?

Hopefully, by the grace of God, they run first to Him and most often to His Word. Hopefully, when marriage gets tense and confusing, they cry out to Him in prayer together. They run to Psalms and epistles and gospels for nourishment, comfort, and direction. After this, perhaps, they seek help from godly men and women who fear the Lord and long for their marriage to reflect Christ and the church to the glory of God. If this is the case, then praise God!

If not, then you will want to say something. They may run to unbelieving parents or to friends who fear man far more than they fear the Lord. They may run to talk shows or websites offering their various and strange forms of "wisdom" for relationships in the modern age. They may simply run to themselves, to their private thoughts and personal theologies. If this is the case, then you will want to gently and clearly encourage them in a different direction. The Exodus narrative can give you a guide by which to guide them.

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SESSION 15: LIFE AHEAD, IN COMMUNITY

Main point: “Maintaining a healthy trajectory in marriage during the years ahead will require your daily dependence upon the grace of God as a husband and wife, especially those graces he supplies to you through His body, the church.” (*Catching Foxes*, p. 260)

A. Session Objectives

1. To impress upon the couple you are helping their incredible need for the people of God, to live in fellowship with the church and accountable to the church
2. To help them see marriage as an opportunity to obey the gospel as a minister of reconciliation to their mate, and help them not see marriage as an amusement park for their fleshly “needs”
3. Answer the question, “Are they living in a community of believers?” Are they part of God’s church?

B. Overall Session Schedule

Prayer

Thank the Lord for His grace upon you all. Thank Him for the gift of the church. Ask Him for greater commitment to be a minister of the gospel in the life of your mate

Interact With the Material

Explore aspects of chapter 15 that seemed especially relevant to the couple you are leading. What questions, concerns, and joys did it bring to the surface?

Are They In Community?

Spend some time talking about the church to which they belong. Are they in a small group of some kind, or in the process of finding one? Do they have established relationships with godly men and women? Now married, are their friends changing? How are they doing with the shift of close relationships that often happens when men and women get married?

Prayer

Pray for the Lord to bless them and keep them in the months ahead.

C. Open Discussion and Fellowship

It may be encouraging to leave some room at the end of this meeting or following the meeting to simply relax and enjoy one another's company. Sharing stories or talking about interests unrelated to marriage could be decent options, whatever seems best to you. Things don't have to end here. Feel free to continue spending time with your couple in the weeks and months ahead. It may be that you see them regularly anyway. Or they may be a part of a separate community of people to which you don't belong, so your contact with them in the months ahead may be minimal.

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Thank You!

I hope and pray the previous weeks you have devoted to leading and loving a couple toward and into marriage has been sweet and encouraging to your hearts. I want to close by saying thank you for your service to the body of Christ, and thank you for your commitment to connecting the gospel of Jesus Christ to the hearts and lives of His people. Since marriage has been given to display and enjoy the reality of Christ and the church, I think pre-marriage and marriage ministry is incredibly worthwhile. God delights in marriage. He made it. Satan hates marriage. It proclaims what he despises: Christ, the church, and the redeeming love of God. May the Lord strengthen your own marriage in His grace! And may He bring other men and women to your door who desire and value the ministry God has equipped you to supply!

Until He comes,

John Henderson