

When the Right One Comes Along

Choosing Your Life's Companion

Delmer and Betty Holbrook

As we enter adulthood, most of us make three important choices that will set the course for the rest of our lives. Those choices involve: our relationship to God, our career or profession, and our decision on marriage.

Most of us carefully think about our reasons for our spiritual commitment. We also invest years of our lives in getting an education and preparing for a career in our chosen field. Yet when it comes to choosing a life partner, many of us take a more passive approach and simply wait for "the right person" to come along.

This approach is unfortunate because choosing a spouse is one of the most important decisions a Christian can ever make. Complicating this decision even further is the fact that there is no such thing as the "perfect marriage." Even couples who are radiantly happy and obviously in love will have their share of disappointments and heartaches.

What then can we say to a Christian young man or young woman who is thinking about finding a marriage partner?

It would be easy to wax eloquent and idealistic with long lists of important considerations—all of them quite true. Yet many single people do not have a large number of options available to them. Picking the ideal mate from among numerous eager candidates is not the reality for many. At the very least, however, the following suggestions are worth some thought:

Know who you are. Have you established your own identity spiritually, intellectually, and socially? Has your prospective partner established his or her direction in life? A marriage will be far more successful and enjoyable if both partners have already

established their own identities (the major task of the teen years) and are ready to deal with the real intimacy of marriage. The average age of partners getting married today is increasing. A more mature person has a better chance of marital success.

Get to know your partner's family. Be certain that you know each other well and that you get as well acquainted with the potential in-laws as possible. It is an old but true saying, "When you marry you marry the whole family." Among other things, knowing the family of your spouse is a big help in understanding your spouse.

Check your spiritual compatibility. Adventists have long insisted, and rightly so, that marriage with non-church members is not a wise choice. In addition, if one partner is seriously committed to the church and the other isn't, there is far more added stress to the marriage, regardless of promises or hopes. Marriage adjustment is difficult at best without the added burden of religious differences.

Know Your Differences

Once you have found someone special who seems compatible, you should explore the more subtle differences that can cause conflict in a marriage relationship. A large majority of couples we have worked with agree that they came into marriage knowing very little about what lay in store for them. It is fair to say that most couples spend much more time planning their weddings than for the marriage afterwards.

During the get-acquainted period of a growing friendship budding into a serious romance and headed for marriage, a couple will often experience stress, misunder-

standings, anger, and an occasional breakup of the relationship for a short time, as well as the excitement and pleasure of romance. Unfortunately, the typical couple tends to avoid deep-seated differences or remain entirely unaware of drastic dissimilarities in their ways of thinking.

For one thing, the dynamics that characterized the families in which each of them grew up in are likely to be quite different. Nevertheless, each assumes that marriage is pretty much what they saw at home, that the spousal roles will be what they saw in their parents. They either tend to follow that model or to reject it out of hand and somehow try to live differently. These differing expectations inevitably lead to conflict.

A common experience that surfaces in young couples is deep disappointment, even disillusionment, within a short time after the wedding. They planned and went through the wedding ceremony with excitement and stars in their eyes. The honeymoon may or may not have been a time of beautiful memories. Within a short time, however, a lot of assumptions begin to surface that cause surprise and hurt. Each partner brought into the marriage a variety of assumptions about work, responsibilities for home tasks, relations to other family members, religion, finances, and a host of other things they simply had not thought much about or had intentionally avoided before the wedding.

Once these differences are out in the open, each partner may feel somewhat betrayed or misled by the other. In the ideal situation, the couple would have actively talked about each of the areas *before* the marriage in order to better understand their differences in at-

titudes and to come to a basic agreement.

Many local churches are recognizing the importance of preparing for marriage by insisting that engaged couples go through a premarriage education course. If they are well-designed and implemented by the couple's pastor or counselor, these courses help a couple to focus on their differing expectations of marriage, the differences in their temperaments, personalities, and goals for marriage, as well as on typical areas such as finances, sexuality, conflict resolution, and communication. Such courses also lead the couple to deal with their unspoken and often contradictory assumptions about their coming marriage relationship.¹

Building Understanding, Trust, and Love

In order to develop a strong and wholesome love, each partner must learn to trust the other. Trust can be built only on understanding. But what does a couple need to understand about each other?

Establishing at least an elementary understanding of both one's own and one's partner's *self-concept* and *temperament* makes it much easier to understand each other's unique reactions and approaches to various areas of marriage.

How a person feels about himself is a major element in understanding how he relates to others. A person with a low self-concept tends to be too defensive and so tied up with his own feelings that he has difficulty listening to and understanding another person.

Self-Esteem is an all-purpose term that often seems to be too vague to be useful. It also comes through to many of us as "self-inflation" and stresses some of the artificial ways of propping up a person's feelings about himself that do not produce long-range success.

We have concentrated on three

other definitions to spell out more explicitly the self-concept. They have proved to be valuable tools in helping people understand themselves and others.

Self-Worth. Our worth comes directly from God—it is a gift. God created each of us. Christ died for each of us. Those two facts give us our identity and our value, and as Thielicke calls it, an "alien dignity." We are, in simple fact, sons and daughters of the King. Every one of us is equally worthy before God. A wholehearted acceptance of that biblical truth helps a person to accept himself or herself, regardless of race, color, education, wealth, or any other artificial standards. An honest acceptance of that truth is a long step forward in building wholesome relationships.

Self-Respect. A person can only respect himself when he knows he is honest with God, with those about him, and himself. Honesty builds self-respect. If a person knows he is living behind a facade, is covering up areas of his life that are far different from the impressions he gives to others, he will have a difficult time genuinely respecting himself. Sadly, a person who does not respect himself cannot respect anyone else.

Self-Image. Through the years from early childhood all of us collect many impressions about ourselves from those around us. For whatever reasons, some receive wholesome positive messages and have a healthy self-image, while others hear and believe a host of negative messages that tell them they are losers.

Working with these three concepts and learning positive ways to come to terms with an honest self-concept is one of the most successful ways of strengthening a relationship.

Differences in Temperament

The second foundation concept for building strong marriages is

understanding more clearly each other's temperament. Various testing materials can help a couple realize and appreciate the richness of their differences, enjoy those differences, and let those differences work for them rather than letting them eat away at their marriage. Some tests require experienced and certified counselors while others are much less sophisticated.²

Let's examine Couple X's temperamental differences. The husband-to-be is meticulous and well organized. In his personal life and on the job he is a perfectionist, or almost so. If something is to be done, it has to be done right. He has a clear sense of right and wrong. Although not very verbal, he is a perceptive observer.

Mr. X was strongly attracted to a classmate in college who was vivacious, fun-loving, very articulate, and popular. In almost every way imaginable she was his exact opposite. Nevertheless, they fell deeply in love and married. Not long afterwards the very characteristics that were an attraction before marriage became the sources of friction and misunderstandings.

This couple took the opportunity to examine their differences carefully with a temperament inventory. Slowly they began to understand each other better and stopped trying to make each over into their own image. Now they enjoy a solid marriage. They still have ups and downs, but they have gained the skills and understandings necessary to cope.

A couple must gain some knowledge of their different temperaments and an understanding of how they feel about themselves, what kinds of messages they received from their families, how they see themselves in their world of work and study. It becomes easier then to understand why their partners react the way they do, why they behave in surprising ways. Such knowledge, however, does not magically eliminate

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stands each particular part of society in its relation to the whole.

- A church mentality works to get people into the church. A kingdom mentality works to insert the church into the world.
- A church mentality worries about the world contaminating the church. A kingdom mentality is anxious to see the church transform the world.³

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German martyr, once remarked that the more exclusively we acknowledge and confess Christ as our Lord, the more fully the wide range of his kingdom will be revealed to us.

Some final questions in the spirit of Jonah's unfinished book which ends with a question mark:

1. Quite honestly, do I dislike the world, fear the world or love the world?

2. How does my attitude toward the world affect my ministry?

3. Does my attitude toward the world enable me to mix easily, lovingly and redemptively with the people of the world, or does it keep me isolated from them?

4. Is the book of Jonah really ancient history or is it present reality and still an open question?

NOTES

1. Jonah 1:1-3; 3:1, 2, *The Living Bible, Paraphrased*. Used by permission (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1971).

2. See Jonah 3:8, NIV.

3. See Howard Snyder, *Liberating the Church* (Downer's Grove IL:

InterVarsity Press, 1983), p. 11.

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problems or disagreements. It is unfair to assume that people disagree only because they do not understand each other. Couples who have learned to understand each other still find areas of disagreement; but it is simply easier for them to cope.

After gaining at least some understanding of each other quite well, a couple then can move on to resolving a host of other difficulties that come up in their daily lives. Misunderstandings and tensions in their sexual experiences, disagreements over finances, difficulties in dealing with each partner's family, and methods about decision making are less threatening and more manageable to the marriage.

God knew what he was doing when, in Eden, he established the family as the basic unit of society. Christians who follow his guidance in choosing their life's companion and in preparing for marriage can look forward to an enjoyable and lasting family life.

NOTES

1. One popular six-session premarriage education course is *Together-ness, Oneness, Joy. Caring for Marriage* was designed by Ron and Karen

Flowers. It is available from church world headquarters and in several languages from division offices. *Marriage Commitment* is the widely used program written by John and Millie Youngberg of Andrews University. For inquiries about these programs write to the General Conference Family Life Office or to Dr. John Youngberg, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI 49104, U.S.A.

2. The popular *Temperament Inventory* by Cruise and Blichington is available in English, Spanish, Portuguese, German, and French through Andrews University Press, Berrien Springs, MI 49104, U.S.A. For information concerning the *Taylor-Johnson Temperament Analysis* write Psychological Publications, Inc., 5300 Hollywood Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90027. The T-JTA is also available in several languages.

RESOURCES

Christian bookstores in many parts of the world display books, journals, articles, tapes, and video cassettes that teach communication skills, conflict-resolving skills, concepts about parenting, money management, Christian understandings about sexuality, and other useful areas of family and marriage. Bibliographies are available from the Family Life Office, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904-6600.

Delmer and Betty Holbrook, founders of the Home and Family Office, have conducted marriage and family seminars around the world.

Pontius' Puddle

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