

**2025**  
RESOURCE  
BOOK



Adventist<sup>®</sup>  
Family Ministries

*I WILL GO WITH MY FAMILY:*

***CELEBRATE CREATION:  
MARRIAGE, FAMILY, AND THE SABBATH***

***WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER***



Adventist®  
Family Ministries

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# **CELEBRATE CREATION:**

**MARRIAGE, FAMILY, AND THE SABBATH**

**WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER**

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## Adventist® Family Ministries

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#### Other Family Ministries Resource Books in this series:

- I Will Go with My Family: Understanding Diverse Families
- I Will Go with My Family: Families and Mental Health
- I Will Go with My Family: Family Resilience
- I Will Go with My Family: Unity in Community
- Reaching Families for Jesus: Making Disciples
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# PREFACE

Genesis 1 and 2 reminds us of the profound beauty and significance of God’s creation. In the beginning, God established three fundamental institutions that continue to shape our lives and faith today: marriage, family, and the Sabbath. These divine gifts, rooted in the Creation story, offer us a framework for understanding our purpose, fostering relationships, and nurturing connection with our Creator.

Marriage—the union of man and woman—reflects the image of God and His love for humanity. Genesis 2:24 reads, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” This sacred bond serves as the foundation for family life, symbolizing Christ’s relationship with His church. As Seventh-day Adventists, we affirm the sanctity of marriage and its role in nurturing love, companionship, and spiritual growth.

The family unit—emerging from the marriage covenant—is God’s chosen vehicle for nurturing faith, values, and character. It’s within the family that we first experience love, learn about God, and develop our understanding of the world. Deuteronomy 6:6-7 instructs, “And these words which I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise.” The family is a living testimony of God’s love and a training ground for discipleship.

The Sabbath—the crowning act of Creation—provides a weekly reminder of our Creator and our place in His grand design. Genesis 2:3 shares, “Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.” We cherish this sacred time to rest from our labors, worship together, and strengthen family bonds. The Sabbath offers a respite from the demands of daily life, allowing us to refocus on our relationships with God and one another.

These three pillars of Creation are intricately connected. A strong marriage provides the foundation for a nurturing family environment. A healthy family creates a space where the blessings of Sabbath can be fully experienced and appreciated. And the Sabbath offers precious time for couples and families to reconnect, worship, and grow together in faith.

As ministry leaders, we are called to uphold and celebrate these divine institutions in our congregations and communities. This resource book is designed to equip you with tools, insights, and inspiration to effectively minister to families, strengthen marriages, and embrace the blessings of Sabbath. By doing so, we honor God's original design and provide a powerful witness to a world in need of His love and truth.

We hope the 2025 Adventist Family Ministries Resource Book—*Celebrate Creation: Marriage, Family, and the Sabbath*—will give us a new appreciation for God's wisdom in creation, compassion for the challenges faced by modern families, and hope in the transformative power of the gospel, being able to say with renewed determination, *I Will Go with My Family*.

Maranatha!

**Willie and Elaine Oliver, Directors**

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# HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE BOOK

The Family Ministries Resource Book is an annual resource organized by the General Conference Adventist Family Ministries with input from the world field to provide Family Ministries leaders in divisions, unions, conferences, and local churches around the world with resources for the special family emphases weeks and Sabbaths.

Within this Resource Book you will find sermon ideas, seminars, children's stories as well as leadership resources, reprinted articles, and book reviews to help facilitate these special days and other programs you may want to implement during the year. In Appendix A you will find useful information that will assist you in implementing family ministries in the local church.

This resource also includes Microsoft PowerPoint® presentations of the seminars and handouts. Seminar facilitators are encouraged to personalize the Microsoft PowerPoint® presentations with their own personal stories and pictures that reflect the diversity of their various communities. To download a presentation please visit: [family.adventist.org/2025RB](https://family.adventist.org/2025RB)

For more topics on a range of family life issues, download previous years of the Resource Book at [family.adventist.org/resource-book/](https://family.adventist.org/resource-book/)

## CHRISTIAN HOME AND MARRIAGE WEEK: FEBRUARY 8-15

Christian Home and Marriage Week takes place in February embracing two Sabbaths: Christian Marriage Day that emphasizes Christian marriage and Christian Home Day that emphasizes parenting. Christian Home and Marriage Week begins on the second Sabbath and ends on the third Sabbath in February.

**CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE DAY (EMPHASIZES MARRIAGE):  
SABBATH, FEBRUARY 8**

Use the marriage sermon idea for the Sabbath worship service and the marriage seminar for any program segment during this celebration.

**CHRISTIAN HOME DAY (EMPHASIZES PARENTING):  
SABBATH, FEBRUARY 15**

Use the parenting sermon idea for the Sabbath worship service and the parenting seminar for any program segment during this celebration.

**FAMILY TOGETHERNESS WEEK OF PRAYER:  
SEPTEMBER 7-13**

Family Togetherness Week of Prayer is scheduled during the first week of September, beginning with the first Sunday and ending on the following Sabbath with Family Togetherness Day of Prayer. Family Togetherness Week of Prayer and Family Togetherness Day of Prayer highlight celebrating families and the church as a family.

A supplemental resource with daily readings and family activities will be provided for the Family Togetherness Week of Prayer. To download this resource please visit: [family.adventist.org/familyworship](http://family.adventist.org/familyworship)

**FAMILY TOGETHERNESS DAY OF PRAYER:  
(FOR MARRIAGES, FAMILIES AND RELATIONSHIPS)  
SABBATH, SEPTEMBER 13**

Use the Family Sermon idea for the Sabbath worship service found in this Resource Book.

# SERMON IDEAS

— *Sermon Ideas* are meant to be an inspiration—the beginning of your own sermon. Pray to be guided by the Holy Spirit, so your thoughts and words may be an extension of God's love for each heart and family.

# SABBATH IS FOR BLESSING

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BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

## THE TEXT

Luke 6:1-11 ESV

### I. INTRODUCTION

Today, we gather to explore a profound and philosophical truth that lies at the heart of our faith and practice as Seventh-day Adventist Christians. Our focus and attention is on Luke 6:1-11, a passage that unwraps and unpacks Jesus' teachings about the Sabbath and challenges us to appreciate, recognize, and understand its true purpose in our lives today.

Imagine a day designed by God Himself—a day of rest, rejuvenation, and blessing. A day set apart from the hustle and bustle of our busy lives, a time to reconnect with our Creator and with our loved ones. This day—brothers and sisters—is the Sabbath, a gift from God to humanity. Yet, throughout history, this divine gift has often been misunderstood, misused, misheard, and even rejected.

In Luke 6:1-11, we find Jesus confronting the religious leaders of His time about their misconceptions and misconstructions regarding the Sabbath. Through His words and actions, Christ exposes, reveals, and uncovers the true purpose of this holy day as a time for blessing, not for

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burden. Today, we'll explore, investigate, and study this passage and determine and discover how we can experience the fullness of God's Sabbath blessing in our lives and the lives of our families.

As we take a deep dive into this text, we'll see how Jesus—as the Lord of the Sabbath—teaches us to prioritize compassion, healing, and doing good on this sacred day. We'll also examine Ellen White's insights on the Sabbath and consider how we can apply her relevant counsel in our contemporary context.

Our sermon today is titled, *Sabbath is for Blessing*; let us pray: “Dear God, as we study Your Word today, open our hearts and minds to understand Your purpose for the Sabbath. Help us to see this day through Your eyes and to experience the blessings You intend for us and our families today. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

## II. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF LUKE 6:1-11

To fully appreciate, grasp, and value the significance of this passage, we need to understand its historical and cultural context. The events described in Luke 6:1-11 take place during Jesus' ministry in Galilee, likely in the second year of His public work.

The Sabbath was a central institution in Jewish life, rooted in the Creation account (Genesis 2:2-3) and codified in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8-11). By the time of Jesus, however, the original purpose of the Sabbath had become concealed, disguised, and obscured by a complex system of rules and regulations developed by the religious leaders of that day.

In their zeal to protect the sanctity of the Sabbath, the Pharisees had created 39 categories of prohibited work, including activities like reaping, threshing, and healing. These man-made restrictions often placed heavy burdens on people, turning the Sabbath from a day of delight into a day of legalistic observance.

It's in this context that Jesus challenges the prevailing understanding of the Sabbath. His actions and teachings, to be sure, serve to reinstate, restore, and reestablish the true meaning and purpose of this holy day.

## III. EXEGESIS OF THE PASSAGE

Let's now examine the text in detail.

### A. THE DISCIPLES PLUCKING GRAIN (LUKE 6:1-5)

“On a Sabbath, while he was going through the grainfields, his disciples plucked and ate some heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands. But some of the Pharisees said, ‘Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?’ And Jesus answered them, ‘Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and

also gave it to those with him?’ And he said to them, ‘The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath’” (Luke 6:1-5, ESV).

In this scene, Jesus and His disciples are walking through grainfields on the Sabbath. The disciples—being hungry—begin to pick heads of grain, rub them in their hands to remove the chaff, and eat the kernels. This action—though seemingly innocent—draws the attention and criticism of the Pharisees.

From the Pharisees’ perspective, the disciples were violating Sabbath laws by engaging in activities that could be classified as reaping and threshing. However, Jesus defends His disciples by referring to a historical precedent—the actions of David and his companions when they were in need (1 Samuel 21:1-6).

Jesus’ response highlights several important points:

1. Human need takes precedence over rigid interpretations of the law.
2. The spirit of the law is more important than its letter.
3. As the “Son of Man,” Jesus claims authority over the Sabbath itself.

## **B. HEALING ON THE SABBATH (LUKE 6:6-11)**

“On another Sabbath, he entered the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was withered. And the scribes and the Pharisees watched him, to see whether he would heal on the Sabbath, so that they might find a reason to accuse him. But he knew their thoughts, and he said to the man with the withered hand, ‘Come and stand here.’ And he rose and stood there. And Jesus said to them, ‘I ask you, is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?’ And after looking around at them all he said to him, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ And he did so, and his hand was restored. But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus” (Luke 6:6-11, ESV).

In this second Sabbath incident, Jesus is teaching in the synagogue when He encounters a man with a withered hand. The Pharisees and teachers of the law are watching Jesus closely, hoping to catch Him breaking their Sabbath regulations.

Jesus, aware of their thoughts, brings the man to the center of attention and poses a crucial question: “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?” This question cuts to the heart of the matter, challenging the religious leaders’ understanding of the purpose of the Sabbath.

By healing the man’s hand, Jesus demonstrates that doing good and showing compassion is not only permissible on the Sabbath but is, in fact, central to its observance. This action further emphasizes Jesus’ authority as Lord of the Sabbath and His mission to restore God’s original intent for this holy day.

## IV. KEY THEMES AND TEACHINGS

From our exegesis of Luke 6:1-11, we can identify several key themes and teachings:

### A. THE PURPOSE OF THE SABBATH

Jesus' actions and words reveal that the Sabbath was designed for human benefit, not as a burden. It's a day for restoration, both physical and spiritual. As He states in Mark 2:27, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." The Sabbath is God's gift to humanity, providing a rhythm of rest and worship in our lives.

### B. JESUS AS LORD OF THE SABBATH

By declaring Himself "Lord of the Sabbath," Jesus asserts His divine authority. As the Creator of the Sabbath, He has the right to interpret its true meaning and purpose. This claim is consistent with John's declaration that "All things were made through him" (John 1:3, ESV).

### C. DOING GOOD ON THE SABBATH

Jesus emphasizes that the Sabbath is a day for doing good and showing compassion. His healing of the man with the shriveled hand demonstrates that acts of mercy and kindness are not only permitted but encouraged on this holy day. This teaching aligns with the prophet Isaiah's vision of true Sabbath-keeping: "If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly; then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken" (Isaiah 58:13-14, ESV).

## V. ELLEN WHITE'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE SABBATH

Ellen G. White offers valuable insights on the Sabbath that align with and expand upon Jesus' teachings in Luke 6:1-11. Let's examine some of her counsel:

### A. THE SABBATH AS A MEMORIAL OF CREATION

White emphasizes that the Sabbath serves as a constant reminder of God's creative power. In *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p.48, she writes:

"The Sabbath was committed to Adam, the father, and representative of the whole human family. Its observance was to be an act of grateful acknowledgment, on the part of all who should dwell upon the earth, that God was their creator and their rightful sovereign; that they were the work of His hands and the subjects of His authority" (White, 1958, p. 48).

## B. THE SABBATH AS A DAY OF BLESSING

White echoes Jesus' teaching that the Sabbath is for human benefit. In *The Desire of Ages*, p. 207, she states:

“The Sabbath is not intended to be a period of useless inactivity. The law forbids secular labor on the rest day of the Lord; the toil that gains a livelihood must cease; no labor for worldly pleasure or profit is lawful upon that day; but as God ceased His labor of creating and rested upon the Sabbath and blessed it, so man is to leave the occupations of his daily life, and devote those sacred hours to healthful rest, to worship, and to holy deeds” (White, 1940, p. 48).

## C. DOING GOOD ON THE SABBATH

Ellen White supports Jesus' example of doing good on the Sabbath. In *Counsels for the Church*, p. 267, she writes:

“Divine mercy has directed that the sick and suffering should be cared for; the labor required to make them comfortable is a work of necessity and no violation of the Sabbath. But all unnecessary work should be avoided. Many carelessly put off till the beginning of the Sabbath little things that should have been done on the day of preparation. This should not be. Any work that is neglected until the commencement of holy time should remain undone until the Sabbath is past” (White, 1957, p. 267).

## D. THE DANGER OF LEGALISM

Ellen White warns against the kind of legalistic Sabbath-keeping that Jesus confronted. In *The Desire of Ages*, p. 204, she cautions:

“The Jews had so perverted the law that they made it a yoke of bondage. Their meaningless requirements had become a byword among other nations. Especially was the Sabbath hedged in by all manner of senseless restrictions. It was not to them a delight, the holy of the Lord, and honorable. The scribes and Pharisees had made its observance an intolerable burden” (White, 1940, p. 204).

These insights from Ellen White reinforce the biblical teaching that the Sabbath is a day for blessing, rest, worship, and doing good. They challenge us to approach Sabbath-keeping not as a legalistic obligation, but as a joyful response to God's love and care for us and His creation. We keep the Sabbath by spending more concentrated and sustained time with God through worship and fellowship with others engaging in the same activity.



## VI. CONTEMPORARY APPLICATION

Now that we've explored the biblical text and Ellen White's insights, let's consider how we can apply these teachings in our contemporary context.

### A. PERSONAL APPLICATION

- 1. Reframing Our Understanding:** Like the religious leaders in Jesus' time, we may need to reexamine our understanding of the Sabbath. Rather than seeing it as a list of dos and don'ts, we should view it as a gift from God—a time for rest, renewal, and deepening our relationship with Him and others.
- 2. Prioritizing Rest:** True rest can be challenging in our fast-paced, always-connected world. The Sabbath invites us to disconnect from our daily routines and reconnect with our Creator. This might involve turning off our digital devices, spending time in worship, in nature, or engaging in quiet reflection and prayer.
- 3. Worship and Community:** The Sabbath provides an opportunity to gather with fellow believers for worship and fellowship. In an increasingly individualistic society, this communal aspect of Sabbath-keeping is more important than ever. It is a time to rejoice and give audible thanks to God for His provision and keeping through the week.
- 4. Doing Good:** Following Jesus' example, we should look for opportunities to do good on the Sabbath. This could involve visiting the sick, helping a neighbor in need, or sharing the good news with relatives and friends.
- 5. Physical and Mental Health:** Regular Sabbath rest can have significant benefits for our physical and mental health. It provides a buffer against burnout and stress, promoting overall well-being.

### B. FAMILY APPLICATION

The Sabbath offers unique opportunities for families to grow closer to each other and to God. Here are some practical ways to make the Sabbath a blessing for your family:

- 1. Preparation:** Involve the whole family in preparing for the Sabbath. This could include cleaning the house, preparing special meals, or setting aside work and school tasks. This preparation helps create anticipation for the Sabbath.
- 2. Family Worship:** Set aside time for family worship to begin the Sabbath and to end the Sabbath. This could include reading Bible stories, singing hymns, or discussing the week's Sabbath School lesson.
- 3. Corporate Worship:** Develop the habit of weekly church attendance with your family to worship God with fellow believers who have gathered to sing songs of thanksgiving, study the Bible, encourage one another, and listen to expositions from the Word of God about His goodness, sacrifice on the cross, and desire to save us. Paul reminds us:

“not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:25, ESV).

4. **Nature Activities:** Spend time in nature as a family. This could be a walk in a park, a hike in the woods, or simply observing God’s creation in your backyard if you have one.
5. **Service Projects:** Engage in family service projects on the Sabbath. This could involve visiting a nursing home, preparing meals for a needy family, or participating in a community clean-up event.
6. **Family Time:** Use the Sabbath for quality family time. Play Bible games together, share meals without distractions, or have meaningful conversations.
7. **Teaching Moments:** Use Sabbath activities as opportunities to teach your children about God’s love and character. Help them see the Sabbath as a special time with God and family, not as a list of restrictions.

### ILLUSTRATION

The Johnson family decided to make their Sabbath celebration more meaningful. So, they started by involving their children in Sabbath preparation on Friday afternoons. They would clean the house together, prepare a special Sabbath meal, and set the table with their best dishes. As the sun set, they would gather for family worship, singing their favorite hymns and sharing what they were thankful for that week. On Sabbath mornings, they regularly went to Sabbath School and worship services. On Sabbath afternoons, they often went for nature walks, using these times to talk about God’s creation and His love for them. They also started a tradition of doing a family service project once a month on Sabbath afternoons and participated in the youth meeting at church when it took place. Over time, the children began to look forward to the Sabbath as the best day of the week—a day of joy, rest, gladness, and connection with God and family.

The Johnsons’ experience reminds us that Sabbath-keeping is not about following a set of rules but about creating a space for meaningful connection with God and family. It’s about finding ways to make the day special and set apart from the rest of the week.

As we think about applying these principles in our own lives, it’s important to remember that Sabbath-keeping needs to have God at the center of everything we do. It is a day to spend more concentrated, unhurried time with God. The key is to focus on the underlying principles of rest, worship, and doing good.

For some, Sabbath rest might mean spending more time in worship and Bible study. For others, it might mean engaging in active service to others and leading people to Jesus. The important thing is that we use this time to step away from our regular routines and focus on our relationship with God and others. After all, the Sabbath is holy time. Remember that “So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that He had done in creation” (Genesis 2:3, ESV). As God rested on the Sabbath, so we should also rest and be intentional about being a blessing to others.

In our modern world, keeping the Sabbath can be challenging. We're often pulled in many directions by work—even ministry work—social obligations and the constant connectivity of our digital devices. But by intentionally remembering it is holy time set aside by God for us to rest from our daily concerns, we create a space for God to work in our lives, refresh our spirits, and give us an opportunity to be a blessing to others.

In addition, our Sabbath-keeping can be a powerful witness to those around us. In a world that often values constant productivity and busyness, our choice to rest and focus on spiritual matters can be a compelling testimony to the values of our faith.

As we seek to apply these Sabbath principles in our lives, we might face challenges or questions. How do we balance rest with the desire to serve others? How do we handle work—especially ministry work—or family obligations that seem to intrude on Sabbath time? These are questions we must wrestle with prayerfully, seeking God's guidance, wisdom, and strength to live as He lived.

Remember, Jesus' example shows us that the Sabbath is about more than just following rules—it's about embodying the love and compassion of God. When we approach the Sabbath with this mindset, we open ourselves up to experiencing its full blessing in our lives and giving us the opportunity to be a blessing to others.

## VII. CONCLUSION

As we conclude our study of Luke 6:1-11, we're reminded that the Sabbath is indeed for blessing. Jesus, as Lord of the Sabbath, invites us to experience the full richness of this divine gift. It's a day for rest, worship, doing good, and strengthening our relationships with God and each other.

Ellen White reminds us: "To all who receive the Sabbath as a sign of Christ's creative and redeeming power, it will be a delight. Seeing Christ in it, they delight themselves in Him" (White, 1940, p. 289).

It is our hope that this will be your experience as you refocus the meaning of the Sabbath as a day of fellowship, enhanced relationships in the family and with others, and time spent drawing closer to God. It is a day for being blessed and for blessing others, just like Jesus did when He was on earth.

May God bless us to this end is our prayer.

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# CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE MUST REPRESENT CHRIST

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BY EKKEHARDT MUELLER

## THE TEXT

Ephesians 5:22-33

## INTRODUCTION

Some time ago, the sports section of a newspaper reported about Emil and Dana Zatopek. They were born on the same day, September 19, 1922. Both were outstanding athletes, she a javelin thrower, he a long-distance runner. They were the first married couple to become Olympic champions at the Summer Olympics in Helsinki—on the same day—July 24, 1952. They celebrated their 75<sup>th</sup> birthday together. Dana was the younger of the two. Their mothers clarified this on their wedding day in 1948. “I was born shortly after midnight,” Emil said, “Dana wasn’t born until seven in the morning.” By then, Dana adds, her parents’ world was in order again, “because her husband had to be older.”<sup>1</sup> This couple had a lot in common, and the picture printed in the newspaper showed a harmonious-looking older couple. Marriage is a divine gift and is supposed to be a reminder of Paradise.

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## THE TEXT: EPHESIANS 5:22-33

Let's look at what Paul has to say about marriage in Ephesians 5:22-33. This is a passage of Scripture that seems to be somewhat unpopular these days:

“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband” (ESV).

This passage sounds offensive to many people. To this day, many women chafe at it, and many men misuse the passage because they get stuck on the second verse and see their wives as subordinates, while they desire to rule and reign without restraint, regardless of the consequences.

## I. COMMENTS ON THE CONTEXT

### 1. THE CHURCH

Ephesians 5:22-33 has two different dimensions. On the one hand, the passage speaks of husband and wife and, on the other, of Christ and the church. The theme of the church runs through this entire letter to the Christians in Ephesus. No wonder Paul returns to the topic of the church at the end. He calls church members to be “imitators of God” and “walk in love” as Jesus did (Eph 5:1-2) spelling out what that means in concrete situations (Eph 5:3-15). He calls them to “walk as children of Light” and “Look carefully how you walk . . . *submitting* to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:15-21).

### 2. THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY CIRCLE

In addition, Paul is also concerned with the family in a broader sense. That is why he does not only speak of husbands and wives, but immediately afterward our passage also of parents and children and of slaves and their masters (Eph 6:1-9). He has something to say to everyone on God's

behalf. Harmony should reign at all levels of relationships. That is why everyone is addressed. When Paul speaks to women, he also sets the men straight. When he demands obedience from children, he also warns fathers against overstepping boundaries.

## II. REMARKS ON THE TEXT AND APPLICATION

### 1. CHRIST AND THE CHURCH

Paul compares the relationship between husband and wife with the relationship between Jesus and the church. This illustrates the high value placed on marriage in Scripture.

Some have dismissed marriage as a second-best option and have spoken out in favor of being single as the best way of life. Others see marriage as hopelessly outdated. They prefer a so-called freedom that allows several partners at the same time or one life partner for a limited time—without commitment and liability. Scripture disagrees! The relationship between a husband and a wife—a male and female—corresponds to the relationship between Christ and the church.

What does the passage tell us about Jesus and His church?

1. Christ is the head of the church (Eph 5:23). The church, for its part, is subject to Christ (Eph 5:24).
2. The text about becoming one flesh—from the creation account—applies not only to marriage, but also to the relationship between Jesus and the church (Eph 5:31-32). Jesus seeks and has the closest connection to His followers and children.
3. Jesus gave himself up for the church by dying on the cross for her (Eph 5:25).<sup>2</sup> He saved His followers (Eph 5:23) and cleansed them (Eph 5:26-27).
4. Jesus nourishes the church and cares for her (Eph 5:29).

In this way, Paul draws a line from creation to redemption to completion. Jesus created the church and called her into existence. He redeemed His followers through His death on the cross. He provides for them and brings them home to be with Him forever.

This also applies to each one of us. Jesus called us into existence. He has guided and kept us. There are many positive things in our lives. But our lives are also marked by guilt and failure, fear and brokenness, hardship and burdens. Jesus wants to give us forgiveness, peace, salvation, and eternal life. He cares for us every day. He gives us meaning and purpose in life. He keeps hope alive beyond the grave. He seeks the closest fellowship with you and me.

### 2. THE MARRIED COUPLE

By comparing the relationship between Jesus and His followers with a marriage between two people, Scriptures' high regard for marriage becomes crystal clear. Truly, marriage is a gift from paradise, since God intended marriage to be paradisiacal. Marriage was instituted by God and is not a human invention. Such a marriage is expected to offer growth, to be a haven of peace, tranquility, and forgiveness when we have sinned against each other. Marriage wants to be a foretaste of God's future kingdom.

Marriage cannot be replaced by any other form of life. Marriage is not outdated, but still highly relevant. Marriage is not a mere biological necessity; it is one of God's best gifts to humankind. This is how marriage should be understood and used—as God's gift to us.

### *a. Wives*

“Martin Walser writes in his poem ‘Room battle’ about marriage: ‘Marriage is like two surgeons constantly operating on each other in the places where it hurts the most.’”<sup>3</sup> Of course, marriage can look like this. But that would be extremely tragic and completely contrary to God's intention. To prevent us from making life difficult for each other in marriage, Paul gives us advice that, if followed, should ensure harmony and happiness.

First it is the wife's turn. “Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife...” (Eph 5:22). There we have what we do not want to hear: Subordination. In the age of emancipation, that sounds quite appalling. Automatically we think the text means: the wife has nothing to say, is her husband's doormat, gives up her identity, and says yes and amen to all her husband's wishes and ideas. Repeatedly, the text has been misunderstood in this direction. The text has been exploited by men to keep their wives down, which is reprehensible.

Anyone who consciously follows the life stories of married couples in the Old Testament—and this applies all the more to the New Testament—will hardly find support for such a concept. At the time of creation, the woman was already placed alongside the man. And in many narratives after the fall, wives have significant input in marriage, family, and society.<sup>4</sup> How can there be a harmonious and intimate union between two people if a top-down relationship is constantly emphasized, a wife is marginalized, and men insist on their supposed rights?

Interestingly, we notice that in our text relatively little is said to wives. They are to submit to their husbands as to the Lord (verse 22). Reasons are provided. Then the idea is repeated again.

### *b. Husbands*

However, from verse 25 onwards it is the husband's turn. And unlike the wives, to whom three verses are dedicated, the husbands receive almost eight verses of admonition.

What is expected of them?

1. *Love like Jesus loved* (Eph 5:25-27): “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave himself up for her.”

Jesus is a role model for man and for woman. As Lord of the universe, he became a human and subordinated Himself—to His parents, to His fellow human beings, and to the human government. Jesus did not insist on His rights. He “who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:6-8).

True greatness is not shown by playing the boss, but by taking the lower road. This is expected of wives and husbands. Paul, with all his apostolic authority, considered himself a servant of the church for the sake of Jesus (2 Corinthians 4:5).

But there is much more. Husbands and wives are called to love, and husbands are told to Love as Jesus loved. Jesus' love was unparalleled. Jesus' love reached the point of self-sacrifice. According to this biblical concept, a husband's love for his wife should go so far that he should be prepared to sacrifice his life for his wife, if necessary.

There is no talk of unrestricted domination, of playing the pasha (a person of high rank) or of regarding the wife as a better slave. Loving as Jesus loved whose love for us drove Him to the cross? That is the challenge. That is what it's all about. Then marriage can be a happy and blessed relationship. The wife respects her husband. The husband loves his wife with all his devotion. However, he does not idolize her, because only the Lord is God. Nor does he become an underling who only dances to his wife's tunes and whom the wife can, therefore, no longer respect. Genuine love also has a backbone.

Loving as Jesus loved! This raises awareness of our limits. Which spouse has not fallen short of love? How many have taken a "legal" position and have tried to defend their own views to the detriment of their spouse? If we want to love in marriage as Jesus loved, we must bring this Jesus into our personal life and into our marriage and live with Him constantly. Then we will receive the strength for selfless love.

What is expected of husbands, we ask again?

2. *Husbands should love their wives as themselves* (Eph 5:28-33): "In the same way, husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it . . . Let every man love his wife as himself . . ."

Paul relates the commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" to marriage. The husband should love his wife as selflessly as Jesus loves. As a man loves himself, he should love his wife.

Paul reminds us of creation and God's plan for man and woman—husband and wife—a man leaves his parents and lives with his wife. The two become one flesh. And he argues: Normally you don't hate your own body. You love it. You clothe it, feed it, care for it. You give it the best. But if a husband and his wife become a single body, then it is quite natural for a husband to love his wife. By loving his wife, a man ultimately loves himself. The same applies in reverse, of course.

If a man loves his wife as described here, then he provides for her in every conceivable way. He provides for her livelihood and does not simply sit back, not lifting a finger and expecting to be served. He treats his wife well. He makes her life bright and happy with small and not so small gifts. He makes sure that joy is in his home and that the cheerful laughter does not dry up. He follows the example of the Lord Jesus, who always has our best interests at heart.



“Pastor Modersohn has divided marriages into four classes: In the first class, the spouses live against each other. . . There is constant fighting. Love has grown cold, happiness is shattered. In the second class, the spouses live side by side. These are the cold, frosty marriages. Neither knows what the other is thinking, what moves them inwardly, what pleases them. Here you are lonely despite the marriage. The third class seems to be more ideal. There you live together. You work together, you earn money together, you have children together . . . And yet this is still not the ideal marriage. To the fourth class belong all marriages in which the spouses live for each other from the point of view: not me, but you! That means: I love you, I help you, I make you happy, I will take the lowest road, I will renounce, I will forgive and forget.”<sup>5</sup>

3. *Three times selfless love* (Eph 5:25, 28, 33). As important as healthy sexuality is in marriage—and our passage does not deny it—it is natural, good, and necessary that husband and wife become one<sup>6</sup>--it is significant that the threefold call to love that is given to husbands here does not contain direct sexual overtones.

God loved the world with His love and gave His Son for its salvation. Paul says of this love that it is patient and kind, that it is not jealous, that it does not seek its own, that it does not allow itself to be provoked and that it does not rejoice at wrongdoing. This love bears everything, believes everything, hopes all things, and endures everything. This love never ceases (1Cor 13:4- 8).

In Ephesians 5 men are called to this love three times: “Husbands, love your wives” (verse 25), “In the same way, husbands should love their wives” (verse 28), “Let each one love his wife” (verse 33).

In some marriages, the spouses behave like the tick on the dog. David Seamands writes:

“The tick is not at all interested in the dog having a good time, it just sucks it dry. The tragedy in some marriages is that both partners only take. Such a marriage is like two ticks and no dog. Two collectors and nothing to collect! A couple visited me years ago. They had been married for 15 years. It was 15 years of marital ping-pong. When he got aggressive or angry, she responded the same way and vice versa. . . They both suffered from emotional wounds and real bitterness. . . She had married him because he seemed to be a spiritual leader, studious, determined, and ambitious. One can imagine her horror when it turned out that he was indecisive and lacking in discipline, lazy, and careless. In her anger she choked him like the servant in the parable and said, ‘You have betrayed me. You owe me everything I expected from you when I married you.’ . . . For fifteen years she nagged him, ‘Pay me what you owe me.’ He had married her because she was good-looking, pretty and neat. You can imagine his terrible disappointment when he discovered that she did her housework sloppily, that she neglected her hair, her clothes, and her whole

appearance. He thought she had tricked him. ‘You owe me those things that made you stand out when I courted you. And so he choked her, saying with mockery and biting remarks: ‘Pay what you owe me...’ Both had been waiting for 15 years for the other to change.’<sup>7</sup>

We desperately need divine love that gives instead of demanding, that offers the potential for growth instead of riddling the other with expectations, that accepts without having to change the other.

### *c. Summary*

In Eph 5, the wife is urged to submit to her husband in verse 22. Again, to submit to her husband in verse 24. To honor her husband in verse 33. As with wives, there are three imperatives for Husbands: the husband is to love his wife.

When the passage speaks about the subordination of wives, this does not mean that they are inferior. The text implies a wife is free to accept equality with her husband in marriage and family and—metaphorically speaking—to let him chair the committee while both have the same voting rights. The text never says: “Let the man subjugate his wife.” It seems that verse 33 defines what submitting means, namely respect and honor. The more the husband loves his wife as Christ loved the church, the easier it will be for his wife to respect him.

## CONCLUSION

God wants our marriages to be harmonious and happy. This is the point of Ephesians 5. God does not want to put a heavy yoke on any of us and make our lives sour. God wants our best. We realize that our natural tendency is to take rather than to give, to dominate rather than to back down, to be loved rather than to love. And yet, we know we will not get anywhere with such an attitude.

May our Heavenly Father give us selfless love we are not capable of producing. May He give us the ability to walk in humility and inner strength. May He grant us His presence each day anew, so that the flowers in the meadows of every marriage will bloom incessantly for His glory.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ludwigsburger Zeitung, 19.9.97 (Translated from German).
- <sup>2</sup> While Jesus died to save all of humanity, here the focus is on the church.
- <sup>3</sup> In Heinz Schäfer, *Mach ein Fenster dran! Beispiele für die Wahrheiten der Bibel* (Stuttgart: Christliches Verlagshaus, 1982), 270 (Translated from German).
- <sup>4</sup> See, e.g., the wives of the patriarchs, Abigail, the OT prophetesses, and the praiseworthy woman in Proverbs 31.
- <sup>5</sup> In Heinz Schäfer (ed.), *Hört ein Gleichnis* (Stuttgart: Christliches Verlagshaus, 1982), 292-293 (Translated from German).
- <sup>6</sup> Cf., for instance, 1Cor 7:2-5.
- <sup>7</sup> In Heinz Schäfer, *In Bildern reden; Beispiele für die Wahrheiten der Bibel* (Stuttgart: Christliches Verlagshaus, 1987), 179-180 (Translated from German).

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# IMAGE-BEARERS

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BY CÉSAR AND CAROLANN DE LEÓN

## THE TEXT

Genesis 1:26-27

## INTRODUCTION

We are the crown, the glory of creation, and wonderstruck that David could not hide his astonishment for God's creative power when he wrote about his boundless awe and reverence at God's creation, "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet: all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild, the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas. Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (Ps. 8:3-9).

The creation story begins in slow motion, where the world's formless and empty darkness takes center stage. It is almost as if, from the beginning of our existence, God wants to convey a message of what happens when the presence of God is missing, and His powerful manifestations have not yet been experienced: *formlessness, emptiness, and darkness*. Every time God is left out of our human experience, every time we venture to exist without God's divine relational presence, we

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will end up unstructured, undefined, empty, and in darkness. Some refer to this state as *chaos*, others experience meaninglessness, and some describe “a sense of darkness” in their lives.

Then, in the midst of the dark, formless emptiness, God manifested himself through the element of *light*, so fundamental to the sustenance of nature and humanity. What would our planet be without light? What would be of plants, animals, insects, oceans, and everything that dwells in them without the sun? Life on this planet would be completely extinct. There wouldn't be humans who would reflect God's glory and honor. There wouldn't be anything to rule over, no flocks and herds, no animals of the wild, nor birds in the sky, no fish swimming the paths of the seas. We wouldn't know just *how* majestic the name of the Lord is in all the earth!

Just as much as we depend on the sun for all the biological, physiological, photosynthesis, and metamorphosis that happens under the sun, the human soul needs the presence of “The Light of the world” for optimal, holistic, image-bearing growth and maturity. “Through him all things were made; without him, nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:3-5).

### ILLUSTRATION

Sandra was a young Christian Seventh-day Adventist girl who grew up in South America. Since childhood, she dreamed of working in Hollywood, making movies and becoming rich and famous. God gifted her with striking, natural beauty. In her early twenties, after working hard for many years in her country, she found a way to move to Los Angeles, (USA) hoping to make her deeply cherished dream a reality. After months of failing to land a role in a movie and dozens of rejections by diverse movie agencies, she began working in a bar to pay her bills and support herself in her high-cost community.

With dwindling hope and fading dreams, Sandra's life became meaningless. Darkness slowly seeped into her increasingly discouraged soul. She felt strangely disconnected from God, from her church, and from herself. One thing led to another, until one day, Sandra met a high-ranking witch who told her she “had been chosen” to become a rich and famous princess in the world of darkness. Sandra attended several occult meetings with this woman, which led her to be initiated as a sexual partner for a group of demons. Total darkness had overtaken Sandra's life.

But the Lord loves His children and has promised not to abandon or forsake us (Heb. 13:5). The night before she was supposed to be officially dedicated to this new diabolic lifestyle, God gave Sandra a dream and told her, “Get out of this city. Get out of this country and go back to your country; otherwise, you will lose your soul and die.” The dream was so gripping that it left Sandra shaken up. The next day, instead of attending her inauguration as a “queen witch,” she returned to her country and desperately sought spiritual help. Sandra rededicated her life to the Lord again, returned to her church family, and began fighting intense battles with the enemy himself. Demons would show up at night to try to use her as a sexual object, and when she tried to resist them, they would try to asphyxiate her. Sandra persisted in constant prayer and sought the

help of the church elders, who prayed and fasted for her until the day she was freed entirely from all satanic dominion. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5, NIV). Satan’s work is to take every “good gift” we have received from the Father of Light and turn it into our destruction, especially our sexuality.

## CREATED IN HIS OWN IMAGE

Our creation story progresses with the triumphant words of Gen. 1:26-27, “Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” There are several aspects of our humanity that bear witness to the fact that we were created in the image of God.

## GOD’S FUNCTIONALITY

1. When Moses asked to see God’s glory, God showed him His back. Moses exclaimed, “And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation”(Exodus 34:6-7).
2. As image-bearers of our Creator God, we were created to be compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and to abound in love and faithfulness. God relies on these image-bearing abilities to call His children back into a relationship with Himself. When calling Peter back into a relationship with Himself, Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love me?” (John 21:15-17). He asked three times, hoping Peter would deepen his understanding of the call Jesus was placing on his life. Lovingly and patiently, the Lord waited for Peter to arrive at a fuller meaning of what it would mean to be truly committed to feeding/serving the broken He loved so deeply.
3. Like our Creator, we also have the ability to reason. In Isaiah, God invites us to “Come and reason together” (Isa. 1:18) because He created us with the cognitive ability to reason and process. We enjoy the ability to have free will and to decide whether we will do good or evil. Because God is relational, He wants to enjoy a relationship with His post-fall children that is free of coercion, or intimidation.
4. Unlike the animal kingdom—we have the ability to believe with an objective living faith. God believed He could create a world inhabited by human beings who could remain faithful to Him and make the correct choice between good and evil. As part of the Plan of Redemption, He believed that Abraham’s seed could carry on the knowledge of His

character from generation to generation and far beyond their ethnic group and, thus, become a blessing for the millions of people that would be called “the children of Abraham through their faith in Jesus.” Paul explains, “Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham” (Galatians 3:7).

5. When we choose to believe, we are adopted into God’s family. “Yet to all who did receive him, to those who *believed* in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12). John confirms this fact in his gospel. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever *believes* in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16 NIV). The apostle Paul reaffirms in his epistle to the Romans the need to believe: If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and *believe* in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you *believe* and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. As Scripture says, “Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.” For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Romans 10:9-13).
6. When we accept our new identity as our Creator’s image-bearers, His Spirit empowers us to display His compassion, graciousness, love and faithfulness, slowness to anger, forgiving heart, thoughtfulness, and kindness. By faith in His loving power, we can exercise our image-bearing ability to reason and practice a living faith in Him.

### GOD’S RELATIONALITY

1. Our God is a relational God. His revelation to the human race is best described by a divinity manifested through three persons: Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three beings are united, distinct, independent in their personalities, and in perfect coexistence. They are linked through eternal love, grace, and unity as described by the Word of God, “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:14, NIV). John tells us these three persons have been in a “relationship” since the beginning. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning (John 1:1-2 NIV).
2. The Trinity experience is like an eternal holy communion of the Father, Son, and Spirit sharing mutual love, honor, happiness, joy, and respect. They enjoy living in an eternal relationship of self-giving.
3. This is precisely the experience Jesus desired and requested from His Father to grant to his disciples. “That they all may be one, as You, Father, *are* in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me” (John 17:21-23).

4. Relationship is the vehicle through which humans can best display the Image of God in the world. There is no better way to showcase our relationship with the Father but through the manner in which we relate to each other. “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By *this* everyone will know that you are my disciples, *if you love one another*” (John 13:34-35 NIV). It is no wonder that John, the disciple that best connected with Christ’s love, wrote, “We know that we have passed from death to life *because we love each other*. Anyone who does not love remains in death” (1 John 3:14 NIV).
5. God is a relational God; thus, we are called to display the experience of the Trinity. It takes three to develop a true healthy relationship. This doesn’t happen unless there are three interrelating individuals. This is why a healthy, loving marriage needs *the vital presence of God* for such to be experienced and displayed.
6. Image-bearing must become more than just an ontological concept. We were created to make the display of His image our *vocation*. What God does, we do. He loves, we love. He displays compassion, we display compassion. He forgives, we forgive. He heals, we become agents of His healing. Imago Dei (the image of God) becomes our primary calling, our life purpose and mission, our *vocation*. We can be teachers, dentists, nurses, bakers, bankers, etc., but as God’s image-bearers, our first and foremost calling is to display God’s loving character in our relationships.

## GOD’S GENDER ASSIGNMENT

1. The creation story shifted into a different rhythm when it came time to create Adam and Eve. The loving, patient, and all-gracious relational Creator was ready to enlarge His circle of relationships. From eternity to eternity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have been doing communion among themselves, and now it was time to create humans, created “just a little lower than angels” (Ps. 8:5). These new creatures were going to have God’s relational image. They were going to be wired with the capabilities to reflect the emotional, psychological, spiritual, and relational functions of their Creator. To best display the gloriously complete image of God, Adam and Eve were designed with differing genders to best experience and celebrate perichoresis. “Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:26-27 NIV).
2. The creation of a man and a woman was intentional. God wanted to create two beings that were equal in value, yet distinct. They, as image-bearers, were designed to function in unified harmony, like the trinity. God designed them with unique and functional sexuality. He created Adam from the ground, a male, and from Adam’s rib, He designed Eve. Both



would enjoy the bliss of a harmonious relationship, different yet equal, who would be united in *holistic oneness* as sexual beings—while enjoying the creative power granted them to conceive and reproduce children—in their likeness—through their sexual union. Our sexuality is very good in God’s sight. Human sexuality is a good gift meant to draw us into a deeper level of knowing and being known (God, another, ourselves). God places a high value on the sexual relationship of a husband and wife. “Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral (Hebrews 13:4 NIV). The only sexual activity recognized in the Bible as “pure, honorable, and not defiled” is the sexual activity that takes place within the marital relationship.

3. Sadly, the biblical account doesn’t end with the seventh day of the creation story; it is followed by the deep descent—The Fall—that changed, altered, and distorted *everything* about everything. While our sexuality is a product of God’s masterful design, after our descent into sin, it bears the full array of image-destroying consequences. We are all products of the epigenetic markings inherited by generations of post-fall consequences. “Parents leave maladies as a legacy to their children. As a rule, every intemperate man who rears children transmits his inclinations and evil tendencies to his offspring; he gives them disease from his own inflamed and corrupted blood. Licentiousness, disease, and imbecility are transmitted as an inheritance of woe from father to son and from generation to generation, and this brings anguish and suffering into the world and is no less than a repetition of the fall of man...” We all—to one degree or another—have experienced the ramifications of the Post-Fall consequences which have altered our pre-fall perspectives, biology, gender, epigenetics, family system experiences, thought patterns, emotional response patterns, attitudes, values, behaviors and relationship patterns—especially our ability to give and receive love.
4. “The interplay of societal attitudes and beliefs, cultural structures, and biological factors shapes the inauthentic sexuality inherent in our fallen human condition” (Balswick, 2021, p.217). After the fall, every aspect of our humanity—including our sexuality—was distorted from God’s original design. The Fall radically affected God’s original creative design. Adam and Eve experienced a breakdown in the way they saw, perceived, and processed everything, including God, themselves, and each other. Their mental, emotional, physical, and relational capacities were forever morphed by sin. The enemy has, throughout history, used *everything* and *anything* he can—including our sexuality to destroy us. His rebellious kingdom is set on inciting power inequities, gender conflict, relational struggle, and unbearable pain. Our post-fall brokenness is evident in our marriages, our families, and our churches through the all-too-common reprehensible acts of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse and neglect experienced by far too many of us.
5. It has become difficult, at best, to achieve an authentic sexuality in the midst of these soul-distorting influences. Toxic masculinity has infected God’s original purpose that men would display the covenant-keeping, loving, gracious, forgiving, empowering, intimacy-seeking character of God. The Western response to post-fall systemic female oppression

has been, at its core, a cry for social, economic, and political rights and freedoms withheld based on gender. “Our world has become an imperfect place, and we have become imperfect in our sexuality. Some people suffer from deficiencies in the genetic package they have inherited; some lack sexual wholeness because of inadequate socialization in the home and community; some are victims of social ills such as rape, pornography, cruelty, deprivation, and emotional disconnections” (Balswick, 2021, p.224). How deeply crushed the heart of the Father, Son, and Spirit must be through countless generations of senseless destruction and devastation.

6. Alterations in our sexuality have taken a variety of forms as a result of complex, interconnected epigenetic, sociocultural, biological, and post-trauma realities. Far too many people have experienced heart-breaking experiences that have resulted in devastating sexual brokenness. This is especially true when these traumatic experiences have occurred in early development and have resulted through non-consensual sexual encounters that have been deeply harmful, creating scars that make their healing journeys a long-term process.

## CONCLUSION

1. When attempting to understand post-fall sexuality, one must consider the countless ways sexual development has been impacted through the centuries by epigenetics, biology, and socio-religious-cultural factors. Our post-fall human sexuality is also a product of an intricate and flawed developmental process that takes place in our less-than-perfect families. The truth of the matter is that all post-fall families—from the healthy and functional to the toxic and dysfunctional—are also influenced by post-fall physiological, psychological, social, and cultural factors. “We need to be aware that “sexual authenticity” is most “attainable” for those who are born with a normal genetic and physiological makeup, who are socialized in a home where parents display healthy attitudes regarding sexuality, and who live in a community where societal values are consistent with biblical teachings” (Balswick, 2021, p.223).
2. Isaiah offers us an accurate post-fall reality check: “Your head is injured, and your heart is sick” (Balswick, 2021, p.223). You are battered from head to foot—covered with bruises, welts, and infected wounds—without any soothing ointments or bandages” (Isa.1:5-6 NLT). For sin-bent image-bearers like me, this description is easy to disavow. “I’m not *that* messed up,” we may conclude. It is difficult, if not painful, to accept that we are less like our Creator than we would like to think. Accepting our own failures and acknowledging how far from the mark we truly are requires *holy humility daily*. It is only as we can see ourselves as broken-by-sin, beloved children of God as described in Jeremiah’s unedited but accurate word-picture, that we will earnestly pray for God’s mercy and compassion as we resist the urge to judge and condemn our broken-by-sin brothers and sisters. Filled with the glorious humility of Christ—our sin-free Redeemer—we will be eager to pray like Jeremiah: “*Heal me and I will be healed, saved me and I will be saved, for you are my praise*” (Jer.17:14).

3. “An understanding of God’s design for human sexuality becomes increasingly important if the individual is to construct a truly meaningful, authentic sexuality. Because the meaning of sexuality is learned within a social context, it is imperative that the family and community powerfully live out and communicate God’s design for human sexuality” (Balswick, 2021, p.223). Our children and grandchildren are watching how we live and interact with each other, and the way we love and relate to God, others, and ourselves is the most transformational sermon many will experience. They will understand by living with us why Jesus summarized *all* of the Law and *all* of the prophets in the “great commandment of the law: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 22:37-40).
4. The journey towards sexual authenticity in a broken world is complex. We all, to one degree or another, carry complex epigenetic injuries that need to be acknowledged, grieved, and then surrendered to the ultimate Healer as we yearn to authentically express our sexuality in relationships that display the glorious image of God. No matter where we fall on the healthy vs. unhealthy sexuality spectrum, we are all sinners in desperate need of an ongoing mind, heart, and soul restoration. It is only through God’s compassionate healing interventions that we can experience hope and a bright future.
5. Marriages, families, and church communities have the privilege of displaying God’s ideal for human love and sexuality while concurrently exemplifying Christ’s compassion and genuine love for those struggling with sexual brokenness. Our image-bearing relationships must be redemptive. It is through our relationships that we can model Jesus’ attitude towards broken people. “For God so loved the world. . .” (John 3:16). We are sent out as Christ’s disciples—God’s image-bearers—as we sacrificially care for and love broken people like us. We are not sent to judge people’s lives. Our all-knowing Judge and Attorney is in charge of that. We are sent to love Christ’s broken sheep right where they are and, through our extravagant, image-bearing compassion, love, and mercy, lead them to a living relationship with our Redeemer, who will choreograph a healing journey unlike anything we could plot out given our limited understanding.
6. As image-bearers, let us not cease praying that God will continue to heal *us*, restore *us*, and redeem *us* so that we can bring supreme honor and glory to His name, not *only* through our sexuality but through *every* area of our lives so that others may experience Jesus. Amen.

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## NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

During the prepubescent stage, boys learn a *boy code* that teaches them to be strong, competitive, and sexually aggressive. In contrast, girls learn a *girl code* that teaches them to be nice, cooperative, and sexually modest. There are also significant differences in levels and types of hormones in boys and girls. Testosterone levels in boys and high estrogen levels in girls, these hormones set the stage for secondary sexual characteristics such as pubic hair, breast and hip development, muscles, etc. Most boys find their masculine identity in male-typical behavior, and girls in female-typical behavior. These behaviors tend to be impacted by parental values and spiritual teachings.

# HANNAH'S PROBLEM

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BY JONGIMPI PAPU

## THE TEXT

I Samuel 1:1-20

## INTRODUCTION

Hannah's prayer for a male child, coupled with her extraordinary willingness to dedicate this gift back to the Giver, stands as one of the most unparalleled prayers in the entire Bible. Aside from the prayers of Jesus, Hannah's prayer is among the most captivating. While Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and several other women in the Bible faced similar situations and may have prayed for a son to alleviate the void and emptiness in their families, none of them considered returning the child to God for lifelong service. Yet, this is precisely what we read in the story of Hannah.

This brings us to a profound question, one that offers insight into Hannah's spiritual landscape: What was Hannah's problem, and what did she pray for? What burdened her heart? Did she yearn for a child to end her suffering and the harassment from her rival, Peninnah? Or was she driven by a holy desire to bring about needed transformation in the House of the Lord, which was under the care of an aging priest and led by his wayward sons?

The answer to this question will undoubtedly challenge us to deeply examine our prayers. What lies at the root of the prayers we lift to God? While we all seek blessings, what is their true purpose in our lives? As we explore Hannah's problem, we must ask ourselves the following penetrating questions: What is my problem? What burdens my heart? What is the one thing I wish God could do

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for my marriage and family that would bring the greatest fulfillment in my life? With these questions in mind, let us dive into the divinely inspired story of Hannah, found in 1 Samuel 1:1-20.

“There was a certain man of Ramathaim-zophim of the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Elkanah the son of Jeroham, son of Elihu, son of Tohu, son of Zuph, an Ephrathite. He had two wives. The name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other, Peninnah. And Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. Now this man used to go up year by year from his city to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the Lord. On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to Peninnah his wife and to all her sons and daughters. But to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb. And her rival used to provoke her grievously to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. So it went on year by year. As often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. And Elkanah, her husband, said to her, ‘Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?’ After they had eaten and drunk in Shiloh, Hannah rose. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly. And she vowed a vow and said, ‘O Lord of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head.’ As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was speaking in her heart; only her lips moved, and her voice was not heard. Therefore, Eli took her to be a drunken woman. And Eli said to her, ‘How long will you go on being drunk? Put your wine away from you.’ But Hannah answered, ‘No, my lord, I am a woman troubled in spirit. I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for all along I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation.’ Then Eli answered, ‘Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition that you have made to him.’ And she said, ‘Let your servant find favor in your eyes.’ Then the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad. They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the Lord; then they went back to their house at Ramah. And Elkanah knew Hannah his wife, and the Lord remembered her. And in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Samuel, for she said, ‘I have asked for him from the Lord’” (1 Samuel 1:1-20).

## NARRATIVE AND APPLICATION

This is not a narrative about Elkanah, even though he is initially introduced. Instead, it is a story about a woman named Hannah. Elkanah, a Levite as detailed in the genealogy found in I Chronicles 6:22-23, was a devout man who, for reasons not mentioned, was supposed to be serving at the temple in Shiloh. Elkanah had two wives, with Hannah as the first wife and Peninnah as the second. Elkanah's desire to continue his lineage led him to enter into a second marriage. However, this decision, rooted in a lack of faith in God, did not bring him happiness (Patriarchs and Prophets, p. 569). This story, beginning as it were with the shortcoming of Elkanah, is used by God to fulfill His purpose. The dire consequences of not following God are outlined, but God can turn any situation and use it for His glory when we come to Him in prayer and repentance.

## HANNAH'S PRAYER

It is the regrettable decision by Elkanah that introduces Hannah into the narrative. Her prayer, recorded in verses nine and ten, changed the natural trajectory of the story and established her as the main character. Hannah's prayer not only changed her life but also altered the decline of worship in the Temple through the miraculous birth of Samuel. It can be said with certainty that her blessing brought the needed reformation to the temple and its services.

The situation in her family caused pain, misery, and grief in Hannah's heart. She was often in tears due to the stress and discomfort of sharing a husband with her rival. Despite this, she never complained, and the only time she spoke was in prayer and her outpouring of praises to God, recorded in chapter two. In response to Eli's inquiry with an open accusation of drunkenness, Hannah replied, "No, my Lord, I am a woman troubled in spirit. I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord" (1 Sam. 1: 15). The Hebrew word for pouring (shaphak) is interestingly often used in the context of sacrifice, referring to the shedding and pouring of blood. This term seems to be appropriate in the context of sacrifice offered by Hannah. She had emptied herself and poured out her soul before the Lord, as the priest would pour the blood of the lifeless victim in the designated place in the temple. The Bible encourages believers to "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7). This carries the same connotation of pouring.

Sometimes the only and best thing to do is to pour out your soul to God. Hannah did not pour out her soul to Eli but to God first, her Creator, the one who was said in the narrative to have closed her womb. This is a lesson for all of us. God is often the last to hear about our challenges after everyone else has tried and failed. It is said that when prayers go up, blessings come down. This was true for Hannah. Her prayer was followed by an outpouring of praises, as recorded in chapter two. By closely examining the content of this prayer, we can gain a comprehensive understanding of what this woman was experiencing.

## **ELKANAH, THE POLYGAMIST AND LOVING HUSBAND**

It is easy and understandable to place the blame for Hannah's pain on Elkanah and his lack of faith in marrying Peninnah. Elkanah's action mirrored that of Abraham, who married Hagar to hasten God's promise of an heir. It is noteworthy that this practice led to untold misery and introduced a spirit of discontentment in Elkanah's family. The same can be seen in the case of Abraham, who succumbed to Sarah's suggestion by marrying Hagar. He did not foresee the misery and pain this would introduce into his household. Soon after this decision, we read the following in Genesis 16:3-5):

So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. And Sarai said to Abram, 'May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!' (Genesis 16:3-5).

Abraham's decision as the head of the family destroyed the happiness within his household. Ellen White states, "Abraham's marriage with Hagar resulted in evil, not only to his own household, but to future generations" (Patriarchs and Prophets, 145). This was certainly the case with Elkanah's family. Hannah, who was loved by Elkanah, suffered the most from this arrangement, and the happiness of the entire family was marred.

In Hannah's prayer, no mention was made of Elkanah, nor was there any reference to the polygamous relationship that caused her misery. Elkanah was a problem, but he was not Hannah's problem. In Sarah's protest against Abraham's decision, she appealed to God to judge between her and Abraham, presenting him as the cause of her pain and frustration. This was not the case with Hannah. This brings us once more to the main question: What was Hannah's problem if it was not her husband?

## **PENINNAH, HANNAH'S RIVAL**

The question arises: was Peninnah the reason for Hannah's prayer? It is noteworthy that Hannah does not mention Peninnah in her prayer. While it can be argued convincingly that Peninnah was a sore point in Hannah's life, it would be incorrect to place the blame for Hannah's misery on her. Hannah's greatest pain was felt when the entire family went before the Lord to worship. On this occasion, she would receive a double portion because Elkanah loved her. However, she was also reminded by Peninnah that God had closed her womb and that she, Peninnah, was God's favorite. This occurred every year. Elkanah treated Hannah as if she had children, while Peninnah reminded her of her childlessness. Thus, we read, "Her rival used to provoke her grievously to



irritate her because the LORD had closed her womb.” It is easy to blame Peninnah for Hannah’s misery. However, Hannah does not mention Peninnah in her prayer. In fact, she did not even complain to Elkanah about Peninnah’s behavior. Elkanah sought to comfort her by reminding her that he was more to her than ten sons. In Sarah’s case, Hagar was mistreated until she decided to leave Abraham’s household. This could have easily been the case with Hannah, but she never protested against Peninnah’s provocations.

On the other hand, it should also be noted that Peninnah had her own pain. She was hurt by the clear indication that Elkanah did not love her, realizing that her role was merely to produce children. Hurt people hurt people. Hannah’s childlessness was a source of comfort for Peninnah, who likely wished for her status to remain unchanged.

We are not fighting against enemies visible to the human eye. “We are not fighting against flesh and blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world...” (Ephesians 6:12). Sometimes, we empower our adversaries by making them the foundation of our misery and, by default, the center of our joy. When we see their presence as a threat to our joy, God’s presence in our lives becomes powerless and meaningless. We can only pray for our enemies when we realize their presence is not the final word. When God has a plan for our lives, no one can thwart it. We do not need to entertain unholy thoughts of wishing our enemies dead to move on with our lives. When Hannah refused to view flesh as her problem, she opened the door to a fuller realization of God’s significance in her life.

## HANNAH’S CHILDLESSNESS

Was Hannah’s grief primarily due to her childlessness? It’s tempting to conclude this, given that the narrative revolves around this point. Her prayer specifically mentions her desire for a male child. However, it would be a gross misrepresentation to suggest that Hannah’s happiness hinged solely on having a child. Introducing children into a toxic family environment, already strained by rivalry, would likely exacerbate issues rather than resolve them.

Viewing children as the sole source of happiness is misleading. Peninnah, who had children, still lacked fulfillment and tormented Hannah out of her own unresolved pain. Elkanah’s anticipated joy from having children with Peninnah was elusive, and Eli’s children caused him grief due to their sinful behavior. It was the introduction of Samuel, not his biological son, that brought Eli relief. The gifts we request from God can never substitute for the presence of God in our lives.

Hannah did pray for a male child, but why would she dedicate him back to God? This gesture was not mandated by God. The child, a joyful toddler, was brought to the temple, not withheld for years until he could assume Levitical duties. Hannah’s specificity in praying for a male child indicates her desire was not selfish. She sought a child that would serve God as a Nazarite, a role only a male child could fulfill. Her prayer aimed to alleviate her barrenness by dedicating her child to God’s service.

## HANNAH'S PRAYER TO BE REMEMBERED BY GOD

Our empathy for Hannah's struggle with childlessness might cause us to overlook the main aspect of her prayer. Despite his involvement, she didn't pray for her husband or blame him for her situation. Nor did she complain about Peninnah's provocations or take steps to remove her. Her prayer is recorded as follows: "O Lord of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give your servant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head" (1 Samuel 1:11).

The core of the prayer was Hannah's plea to be remembered and not to be forgotten. "Elkanah knew Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her" (1:19). The part played by Elkanah in the conception of Samuel was necessary but not sufficient. It was God's remembrance of Hannah that was a turning point in this protracted saga. The word *zakar* in this context implies that God took note of Hannah's situation and acted. Divine remembrance often leads to God's intervention in response to prayers or covenant promises.

God remembered Hannah not just for her sake but for His purposes, facilitating necessary worship reforms and revival in the nation of Israel. By remembering Hannah, God entered into a special relationship with her to achieve His mission. This is evident when we read, "Indeed the LORD visited Hannah, and she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters. And the boy Samuel grew in the presence of the LORD" (2:21). Remembrance preceded 'visited.' It is as if God visits those He has remembered. Hannah's prayer was for God to remember her, but it appears that this remembering may have opened the way for God's visitation. The five additional children she bore were a result of this divine visitation.

The burden of restoring our relationship with God is the source of all divine blessings. God will not withhold anything that brings honor and glory to His name. When our requests align with God's purpose, He will miraculously open the way, blessing us individually and granting us the privilege of contributing to His mission of saving the world. The importance of connecting our efforts with God's purpose is highlighted in the book *Education*, page 291: "God's purpose for His children growing up beside our hearth is wider, deeper, higher, than our restricted vision has comprehended." Let our personal problems include God's purpose, and let our prayers focus on fulfilling God's mission. Often, our prayers are too limited to what we can see and what would satisfy us. Hannah's prayer went beyond her needs and intersected with God's purpose. Samuel would become one of the greatest judges in Israel, not just Hannah's child.

## THE SOURCE OF HANNAH'S JOY

Hannah's joy was not solely dependent on having a child. Her relief and happiness came from the assurance that God had heard her prayers. After her interaction with Eli, she found peace, and her sadness lifted, even before the birth of her child. Her joy stemmed from her faith and trust in God, which transcended her circumstances. In I Samuel 2:1-2 the Bible says, "My heart rejoices

in the Lord...nor is there any Rock like our God". The joy she had before the child would still be hers after she had left the child with Eli. Commenting on Matthew 11:28-30, Ellen White says:

*"Those who take Christ at His word, and surrender their souls to His keeping, their lives to His ordering, will find peace and quietude. Nothing of the world can make them sad when Jesus makes them glad by His presence. In perfect acquiescence there is perfect rest. The Lord says, 'Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee: because he trusteth in Thee'. (Isaiah 26:3)" (White, 1940, p. 331).*

The peace Hannah experienced, as described in Philippians 4:7, precedes the fulfillment of specific prayers and remains regardless of outcomes. This divine peace, not found in marriage or childbearing, is what ultimately sustained her. It can also be added that her joy was to see her child advancing God's work with dignity. This was the same place where she was taunted every year, but now she will have the privilege of watching her own son ministering in the temple.

*"But Samuel ministered before the LORD, even as a child, wearing a linen ephod. Moreover, his mother used to make him a little robe and bring it to him year by year when she came up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. And Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife..." (I Samuel 2:18,19).*

Nothing could bring more joy to Hannah's heart. The sacrifice was worth it, bringing her peace and indescribable joy. This is the longing we all share, a desire that money cannot buy and neither marriage nor children can fulfill. It comes from God, our Rock. What we truly seek is an undisturbed rest that only Christ can give. This peace does not come with God's gifts of marriage, family, and material blessings; it precedes them. It enables us to use what we have received for God's glory and the advancement of His work. The Bible presents this joy as available to us today, not just a future hope.

## CONCLUSION

Hannah's problem turned out to align with God's purpose. She longed to be remembered, and God sought a man to bring change to the temple and the nation of Israel. God used her barrenness to draw her attention to His plan. Although she eventually had five more children, her primary role was to introduce Samuel to Israel and the world. Her pain and suffering led her closer to God. The real challenge isn't getting what we desire but using what we receive to serve God and His people. We must ask ourselves: What is the one thing that would make a difference in our marriage and families? Connect your prayers with God's mission and purpose. It is often said that when we prioritize God's work, He prioritizes ours. With Jesus in the family, we can face any storm with a smile. May this be our experience. Amen!

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# CHILDREN'S STORIES

— Use *Children's Stories* for the special family Sabbaths. Please feel free to use props and materials that are easily available to you. The objective is to engage the children in your church family.

# A GARDEN WEDDING

BY ELAINE OLIVER

## THE TEXT

Genesis 2:18-25

## MATERIALS

Bible, flowers, picture of a bride and groom

### LEADER ASKS:

Do you remember the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden?

*Respond positively to the children's responses, being careful not to stop to take specific answers.*

In the beautiful garden of Eden, Adam and Eve lived happily **together** (**Note: please do not say 'happily ever after'**). They cared for each other, shared their days exploring the wonders around them, and talked to God every day. God blessed their marriage, making it the first of many loving marriages in our world.

Many, many years later, in a busy city with tall buildings and bustling streets [adapt to your own community] lived a young couple named Charlotte and Mateo. They had heard the story of Adam and Eve in Sabbath school and often wondered what it meant for their own lives and their new marriage.

### LEADER ASKS:

How many of you think you would like to be married one day, just like Adam and Eve and Charlotte and Mateo? *Respond to the children's responses but do not stop to take any one response.*

One sunny Sunday morning, Charlotte and Mateo visited the local community gardens. As they walked through the gate, Mateo smiled and said, “You know, Charlotte, this reminds me a bit of the Garden of Eden. It’s not as big, but it’s still full of life and beauty.”

Charlotte nodded, looking at the colorful flowers and fresh vegetables growing all around them. “You’re right! And just like Adam and Eve, we’re here together, enjoying God’s creation.”

As they strolled through the garden, Charlotte and Mateo noticed an elderly couple tending to a patch of tomatoes. The old man carefully tied the plants to stakes while his wife gently watered the soil.

“Hello there!” the old woman called out with a warm smile. “I’m Rose, and this is my husband, George. We’ve been married for 50 years now.”

Charlotte and Mateo introduced themselves and mentioned that they were newlyweds, just recently married. Rose’s eyes twinkled as she said, “Oh, how wonderful! You know, marriage is a lot like this garden. It needs constant care, patience, and love to grow strong and beautiful.”

George nodded in agreement. “That’s right. Just as Adam and Eve worked together in the Garden of Eden, Rose and I have worked side by side all these years. Sometimes it’s been hard work, but it’s always been worth it.”

“You see,” Rose explained, “God gave Adam and Eve to each other as helpers and companions. That’s what George and I have been for each other all these years. And with God’s help, that’s what you can be for each other too.”

Charlotte and Mateo thanked the older couple for their wisdom and continued their walk through the beautiful garden. They stopped to admire a beautiful rose bush, its blossoms vibrant and fragrant.

“You know, Mateo,” Charlotte said thoughtfully, “I think I understand the story of Adam and Eve a little better now. It’s not just about the first two people God created. It’s about how He designed marriage to be – a partnership filled with love, support, and shared purpose for as long as we live.”

Mateo squeezed Charlotte’s hand and replied, “You’re right. And just like Rose and George, we can choose to nurture our marriage every day. We can be there for each other, work together, and grow in love – just like God intended from the very beginning.”

As they left the garden that day, Charlotte and Mateo realized that marriage is a precious gift from God every day, to reflect God’s image to each other by being kind, caring, supportive, loving, and forgiving.

So even though you are not married yet and won’t be for a very long time, you can still reflect God’s image in how you treat each other by saying nice words, doing kind deeds, and forgiving others when they don’t treat you nicely. ***[If time permits, you can ask children for other ways they can be like God or Jesus]***

Let’s pray: Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for creating us to be in good and healthy relationships. Thank you for the gift of marriage which helps us to be more like you. Please help us to be loving, kind, and forgiving to others every day just like you. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

# LIVING WATER

BY NOEMI DURÁN ROYO

## THE TEXTS

Genesis 1:2, John 4:14

## PROPS

Small plant in a pot, small watering can, glass with water, balloon filled with air, balloon half-filled with water and half-filled with air, lighter/candle.

Do you know what the first words of the Bible are? (*Let children respond*) Exactly! In Genesis 1:1, we read that “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” Then, in verse 2, we read: “The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the *(pause)* WATERS.” (*Emphasize*). It looks like water was one of the first things that God created. Why would He do that? Because God is super smart. He had a plan to create a gorgeous planet and make all kinds of creatures live in it: plants and trees, animals of many sizes, shapes and colors, and people. And God knew that all living beings, plants, animals, and people need water!

(*Hold the plant in one hand and the watering can in the other, and show it to the children*) Do you have any potted plants at home? If you do, you’ll know they must be watered regularly (*water the plant a little*). Raise your hand if you have a pet (*wait for the children to raise their hands and, if there is enough time, ask some of them which type of pet they have*): a dog, a cat, a bird... All of your pets need to drink water several times a day, so you have to make sure that clean water is always



available to them. Now, besides plants and animals, who else needs water? We do! On the inside and on the outside. To stay healthy, we need to drink water (*drink a sip of water from the glass*), and we also need water to wash our hands, brush our teeth, and take a shower.

From the Bible, we know that Jesus also needed to drink water. We can read about it in John chapter 4. Jesus was traveling and he was tired, so he sat by a well. Then, a Samaritan woman came, and Jesus asked her for some water. The woman was surprised because, at that time, Jewish men did not talk to women in the street, and even less so to foreign women. But Jesus was not an ordinary Jewish man. He knew this woman was suffering and wanted to help her. The woman was sad and felt very lonely. She had no friends and had been having family problems for a long time.

Have you ever felt sad or lonely? Usually, we feel that way when bad things happen to us or our family. Maybe someone in the family is sick, mom or dad has lost their job, or grades in school are not as high as they should be. Sometimes, we suffer because of something we've done wrong, like not studying enough, and we feel guilty, but many other times, the bad things that affect our family are no one's fault.

The woman at the well felt a mixture of sadness, loneliness, and guilt. Let's imagine her as this balloon (*hold the air-filled balloon in your hand*) and the flame of this lighter (*hold the lighter with the other hand and light it*) as all the bad things happening in her life. Before meeting Jesus, the woman felt that she couldn't take it much longer, that if bad things kept happening to her, she'd break (*Bring the flame of the lighter close to the balloon and make it burst. Pause and wait a few seconds for the children to calm.*) But that didn't happen because she met Jesus, and Jesus had a solution for her. In John chapter 4, verse 14, we read that Jesus offered this woman a special type of water that would turn her sad and lonely life into a wonderful, everlasting life. Jesus was not talking about magic water. He was not even referring to actual water like this one (*point to the glass*). What Jesus meant is that, just as we need to drink water several times every day to stay healthy, we also need to connect with him every day by praying and reading the Bible. If we do that, we will be like this balloon (*show the balloon half filled with water*), which has the special water of Jesus inside. Then, when bad things happen to us (*light the lighter and hold it below the balloon, where the water is, touching the balloon with the flame for 1 or 2 seconds. It will not burst.*), we will not break because Jesus will help us to cope.

Do you know why fire cannot break this balloon? When God created water, He made it in an extraordinary way with the capacity to absorb huge amounts of heat (*Light the lighter again and approach the flame to the bottom of the balloon*). The water in the balloon absorbs most of the fire's heat and protects the balloon's rubber from burning and breaking. Jesus does the same, protecting us by taking the bad things on himself. If we are friends with Jesus and have Jesus in our lives, He will help us in every difficult situation. He did it for the woman at the well, and He will do it for you and your family. Let's pray.

Let's Pray. Dear God, thank you very much for the water you created to keep us healthy and clean. Thank you for also giving us your special water that protects and helps us in difficult situations. Help us to connect with you every day. In Jesus' name, amen.

**NOTE:** Watch the balloon experiment at <https://youtu.be/r-LOG7qxTz8?si=78wTpKc9Dn2-vc6T>

# REMEMBER THE SABBATH

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BY DAWN JACOBSON-VENN

## THE TEXTS

Genesis 1:1-10, Exodus 20:8

## PROPS

Colorful, engaging pictures that depict each day of creation. A cell phone.

## NOTE

You could involve the children by having them hold pictures depicting each day of creation. To save time, choose seven helpers ahead of time to hold up pictures as you tell the story.

The Bible tells us in Genesis 1 that in the very beginning, “God created the heavens and the earth.” Isn’t that amazing? We have such an AWESOME Creator GOD! Today, let’s go on an adventure to remember what God made!

**On the first day of Creation** (*show picture*), God said, “Let there be light!” And guess what? The light appeared just like that! God divided the light from the darkness. Now, there was light during the day and darkness at night so that we could rest. Isn’t God smart?

**On the second day of Creation:** (*show picture*) God created the sky! He put a big, blue sky above us, and kept the water down below. Can you imagine the sky without clouds and sunshine? Whenever you look up at the sky, remember God made it just for us!

**On the third day of Creation:** *(show picture)* God made the land and the seas. He created tall mountains, rolling hills, and sparkling oceans. But God didn't stop there—He filled the earth with all kinds of plants, flowers, and trees. Can you imagine a world without trees to climb or flowers to smell?

**On the fourth day of Creation:** *(show picture)* God made the sun, moon, and stars! He put the sun in the sky to warm us during the day and made the moon and stars to shine at night. Have you seen the stars twinkle in the night sky? God made each one!

**On the fifth day of Creation:** *(show picture)* God filled the oceans with fish, dolphins, and whales! Then He made birds of all colors and sizes to fly through the sky. I bet you have a favorite ocean animal or bird *(if time allows, you can let the children share)*. Isn't it amazing how many different ones God created?

**On the sixth day of Creation:** *(show picture)* God made all the animals—lions, elephants, dogs, cats, and even the teeny, tiny ants! But His best creation of all was **YOU!** God made people in His image, starting with Adam and Eve. Isn't it cool to know you are one of God's favorite creations?

After working hard for six days, God was finished. **On the seventh day of Creation week** *(show picture)*, He looked at everything He had made and said, **"It is very good!"** What do you think God did next? *(Pause for kids to answer)*. He rested from His work of creating. He blessed the seventh day, which He called the Sabbath, and He made it holy.

**God made the Sabbath because He knew we needed it!**

You might feel full of energy as if you could play all day long! But even you need a little rest, and so do your parents! In fact, I think they sometimes wonder whether your batteries will ever run out! But think about a cell phone *(hold one up)*—what happens if you don't charge it? *(Let kids respond)*. That's right, the battery dies, and the phone won't work. We are like that, too! God knew we would need to "recharge" after a busy week, so He gave us the Sabbath.

God loves us so much that He made the Sabbath Day. He also knew that we might forget. That's why He wrote the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment, "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy." Every Sabbath is an appointment with God—a special day to spend with Him, our family, our church family, to laugh with friends, enjoy all that God created, and rest and recharge ourselves for the week ahead. Sabbath is so important to God that He put us on His appointment calendar, in His schedule, every single Sabbath since He created the world! That is how important the Sabbath is! And that is how important we are to God! God wants us to be that important to Him, too. "Do you put God in your appointment calendar each week?"

**Let's Pray Together:** Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for creating such a beautiful world for us to live in. Thank You for giving us the Sabbath, a day to rest, worship You, and enjoy time with our family and friends. Help us to remember this special day each week and keep it holy, just like You taught us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

# STRONG AS A BRICK WALL

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BY MILDRED WEISS

## THE TEXT

Matthew 19:26

## PROPS

Pictures of animals or a variety of stuffed or toy animals that look life-like.

I know that many of you have favorite animals. If I ask you about it, I'm sure we will have many answers. *(If you have time, ask about their favorite animals while showing some pictures of them).* I also have a favorite animal, well, actually, I have two favorite animals. God's creation is unique! My favorite animals are the giraffe and the penguin! *(you can show them pictures of your favorite animal and why it is your favorite animal)* I think God had a lot of fun creating all the different animals!

Now, I have a question for you. Do you know what **arthropods** are? (Wait for answers) I learned that **arthropods** are a big family of creatures, including insects, invertebrates, and arachnids. *(Show some pictures)* Some of them we know are very important, like bees, earthworms, and butterflies! Some of them are beautiful and useful. Some are just useful, and some valuable and scary, like the bees and wasps *(Talk about the essential job pollinators have, the beauty of the butterflies, and the crucial role of worms in the soil).*

I have never considered having an insect or spider as my favorite creature. However, I'm sure the man in today's story changed his mind about insects!

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During World War II, a US marine was separated from his unit in the dangerous terrain of Okinawa, Japan. The fighting had been intense, and in the smoke and the crossfire, he had lost touch with his comrades, leaving him alone in enemy territory.

Alone in the hills, he could hear enemy soldiers approaching him. Scrambling for cover, he found his way up a high ridge to several small caves in the rock. Quickly, he crawled inside one of the caves. Although safe for the moment, he realized that once the enemy soldiers looking for him swept up the ridge, they would quickly search all the caves, and he would be killed.

As he waited, he prayed, “Lord, if it be your will, please protect me. Whatever your will is, I love you and trust you. Amen.”

After praying, he lay quietly, listening to the enemy begin to draw close. He thought, “Well, I guess the Lord isn’t going to help me out of this one...” Then he saw a spider begin to build a web over the front of his cave. As he watched, listening to the enemy searching for him all the while, the spider layered strand after strand of web across the opening of the cave.

“Lord,” he prayed again. “What I need is a brick wall and not a spider web, something that can protect me.”

But God does have a sense of humor. As the enemy drew closer, he watched from the darkness of his hideout and could see them searching one cave after another. He got ready to make his last stand when they approached his hiding spot. To his amazement, however, after glancing in the direction of his cave, the Japanese soldiers moved on. Suddenly, he realized that with the spider web over the entrance, his cave looked like it had been quite a while since anyone had entered.

“Lord, forgive me,” prayed the young marine. “I had forgotten that in you, a spider’s web is as strong as a brick wall!”

The marine was spared and lived to tell the tale, and I’m sure he loved spiders and spiderwebs from that moment on.

When we face great crises in our lives, it is so easy to lose hope in what God can do in our lives, sometimes in the most surprising ways. Always place your hope in God, for with Him, a mere spider’s web can be a brick wall of protection (Grigonis, 2019). With God, all things are possible.

Let’s open our bibles in Matthew 19:26

**Read:** “But Jesus looked at them and said to them, ‘With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible’” (Matthew 19:26, NKJV).

**Prayer:** “Dear Father in heaven, thank you for the wonderful creatures you have created. Help us to be like them, willing to obey your voice and trust in You. All that you have created was for us to enjoy, experience, and see how much you love and care for us. We know that in your hands, a spider’s web is as strong as a brick wall. We love you, and thank You. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.”

## REFERENCE

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<https://www.fatherduffy.com/god-and-the-spider/>

# SEMINARS

— *Seminars* are designed to be used during Christian Home and Marriage Week. Please read the seminars thoroughly to get familiar with the content and technical terms. To download a PowerPoint® presentation file visit: [family.adventist.org/2025RB](http://family.adventist.org/2025RB)

# GOD'S WONDERFUL DESIGN FOR RELATIONSHIPS

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BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

## THE TEXT

Genesis 1 and 2

## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

This seminar is intended to be a Bible study to help participants glean a biblical perspective of God's intention for human relationships. While it does make some references to contemporary relationship science, its primary purpose is to examine what the Bible says about relationships and how today's Christians can find the relevance of biblical principles to guide all their relationships in contemporary times.

God's creation was a breathtaking masterpiece! Every choice God made was flawless, His ways surpassing our understanding and His thoughts beyond our comprehension (Isa. 55:9). Light, firmament, earth, seas, grass, herbs, seeds, flowers, trees, fruit, sun, moon, stars, birds, fish, animals, reptiles, and humans—Adam and Eve—"in the image of God...male and female He created them" (Gen. 1:27). In this process, God embedded in humankind a deep drive for intimacy—emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual. Humans everywhere strongly desire to be loved, accepted, and appreciated. This is a part of God's profound design.

In the 19th century, the majority of infants in orphanages succumbed to a condition known as marasmus (consumption) within their first year of life. Despite the pleasant environment, the babies'

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health declined, leading to a loss of interest in life, weakened immune systems, and eventual death. After careful observation, doctors from the United Nations prescribed a simple yet effective solution. They recommended that nurses pick up the babies, hug them, play with them, and talk to them for ten minutes every hour. This seemingly non-scientific approach, now recognized as an evidence-based attachment or bonding theory, proved to be remarkably successful in curing the babies (Bick & Nelson, 2016, pp. 177-196). In all humans, God has a divinely embedded the need to love and be loved, to be in healthy and happy relationships. We have been hardwired for connection; in other words, meaningful relationships are essential for our well-being (Cozolino, 2014).

### MALE AND FEMALE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

When a baby is born, the first thing her parents and other relatives around her exclaim is, “She looks just like...” People often want to connect the image of the child to themselves. Genesis 1 and 2 make clear that human beings are created in God’s image. Adam and Eve were created differently from other beings called into existence (Gen. 1:24,25). They were given unique social skills, which are unlike anything else in God’s creation. Humans look just like our Creator; we are created in His image.

As social beings with their gender particularity as male and female, human beings are exclusive in the character and distinctiveness of their intimate partnership with each other and with God. The significant characteristic of humans—male and female—exemplifies the *image of God* (the *imago Dei*) in humans (Gen. 1:26, 27; 5:1, 2). Scripture reveals a God who is not alone (Gen. 1:26, 27; 3:22; 11:7; Isa. 6:8, cf. John 10:30), establishing a persuasive rationale for creating humans—male and female—in His image to have communion with Him and for them to have relationship with each other. Thus, God created Eve in the context of loneliness, “It is not good that man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18), He said. This doesn’t mean that a single person cannot represent the image of God since all human beings are created in God’s image (Gen. 1:27; Ps. 139:14). Yet, the creation story establishes marriage (Gen. 2:20-24) and family (Ps. 68:6) as God’s primary answer to the aloneness of humankind.

Human beings, as social creatures, have a unique and special connection to one another and to God as both male and female. The characteristics of both men and women reflect the image of God in humans. Scripture shows that God is not alone, which is why He created humans in His image to have a relationship with Him and with each other. This is why God created Eve to address the problem of loneliness. While all humans are created in God’s image, the creation story highlights marriage and family as God’s primary solution to human loneliness.

Created in the image of God, Adam and Eve were destined for a purpose beyond themselves, a relationship with the Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—which was God’s intent for the human family going forward (Jer. 1:4-5; Eph. 2:10; Rom. 8:28; Phil. 2:13). The creation narrative references humankind as the high point of creation, “...Let us make man in our image...And let them have dominion over...” (Gen. 1:26). “He was placed, as God’s representative, over the



lower orders of being.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 45. This was confirmation that human beings were uniquely created and blessed by God. They were made in His image and meant to be called the children of God (1 John 3:1).

While the population of single adults has skyrocketed over the last three decades—especially in industrialized societies—there is no mistake God created human beings to be in relationships (Prov. 3:3, 4). God’s original plan placed human beings in the context of marriage and family relationships to help humankind have a working model for all future relationships, intimate or platonic (Col. 3:12-14). So, whether married or single, humans were created to be in relationships that honor God (Gal. 5:16). That’s why Paul encourages: “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave us” (Eph. 4:32, ESV).

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### INDIVIDUAL/GROUP DISCUSSION

What do you think God is communicating about His love and regard for humankind in His act of creation?

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## GOD’S COVENANT RELATIONSHIP WITH HUMANS

From the very first mention of the creation of human beings, the Bible establishes God’s desire to be in close relationship and communion with us. “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth’” (Gen. 1:26).

Despite the disobedience of the first man and the first woman, which led to their expulsion from the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:1-24), God set in motion a plan to rescue humankind from the consequences of their disobedience. This was crucial for the future of humanity and for maintaining a relationship with God. God thus made the first promise of redemption in the Bible: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel” (Gen. 3:15). The “seed” of the woman, referring to Jesus Christ, would ultimately defeat the serpent (Satan) and reconcile the relationship between God and humans, bringing about peace. This provision, accomplished through Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, would restore humans’ access to a relationship with God and grant them eternal life. “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23).

Despite God’s attempt to repair the relationship with humanity, people persistently sinned, which led God to consider wiping them out (Genesis 6:5-7). However, God found Noah, a faithful and steadfast man, and made a covenant with him—the first one mentioned in the Bible (Genesis 6:8, 13-22). Subsequently, God made a covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17:1-13). Despite human sinfulness, God continues to pursue a relationship with us (Romans 5:8-17).

**INDIVIDUAL/GROUP DISCUSSION:**

What can you do each day to enhance your relationships by emulating God's example of loving you?

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**THE NEED FOR RELATIONSHIP IS EMBEDDED IN HUMANKIND**

Before the creation of Eve, Adam had no one of his kind to relate to. Adam could not just relate to himself or procreate by himself. This meant that unless something more was a part of God's plan for the world's creation, the human species would not survive. So, in God's sequence at this juncture of His creation—the creation of man—He said it was not good (Gen. 2:18). To be sure, God's plan for the human race would not work unless that plan were carried to completion.

God embedded the need for relationships in humankind's DNA by taking a rib from Adam's side to create Eve (Gen. 2: 21, 22). An inescapable reality of the creation story is that humans are two-in-one—male and female (Gen. 1:27; Matt. 19:4)—created to be in a relationship. This means that male and female together uniquely reflect God's image, a part of God's blueprint for human relationships.

While marriage is presented in Scripture as the ideal context for human beings to experience ultimate closeness in human relationships (Gen. 2:18, 24, 25), it isn't the only context in which human beings experience meaningful relationships and closeness. After all, Jesus was never married. David and Jonathan had an excellent, close, and supportive relationship as described in the biblical record: "The soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. . . . Then Jonathan and David made a covenant because he loved him as his own soul" (1 Samuel 18:1, 3).

Another biblical narrative that draws attention to a close and supportive relationship between two human beings outside the context of marriage is that of Naomi and Ruth—her daughter-in-law—after the death of her (Ruth's) husband: "But Ruth said: 'Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God'" (Ruth 1:16).

John—the disciple of Jesus—who wrote this epistle, establishes himself at the beginning of the letter as an eyewitness of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. According to his own testimony, what he shares here is based on what he saw, heard, and touched. Because he experienced the way Jesus loved and understood the purpose of the life and ministry of Jesus, John shared: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

John was so moved by the Love God showed that he urged his hearers to "love one another" as an indication they had accepted God's Love through the person of Jesus Christ.

John makes it clear that the person who doesn't love does not know God, "for God is love." Essentially, one cannot claim to be a believer if one doesn't love like God. Jesus himself reiterates to

His disciples that God's plan from the beginning was for them to love God and one another when He shared: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples if you have love for one another" (John 13:34, 35).

To ensure there is a clear understanding of what this kind of Love looks like, the apostle Paul shares: "Love suffers long and is kind; Love does not envy; Love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails..." (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).

Paul further shares: "Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do" (Colossians 3:12-14).

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### PERSONAL REFLECTION

What will you do each day to communicate to everyone in your inner and outer circles that you are a disciple of Jesus Christ?

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### CONCLUSION

When we think about God's wonderful design for relationships, we tend to think about marriage and family. And while marriage and family were very much a part of God's ideal for relationships at creation—demonstrated by the union of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden—God's intent for relationship goes beyond the borders of the home to include every human being created in His image, which we should relate to with Love and compassion as representatives of Jesus Christ. Peter—one of Jesus' disciples—offers: "And above all things have fervent love for one another, for love will cover a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without grumbling" (1 Peter 4:8, 9).

God embedded in humankind a deep drive for intimacy - emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual. This design is evident in our universal need for connection, a concept strongly supported by contemporary relationship theory. Stephen Covey's idea of the "emotional bank account" in relationships echoes the give-and-take nature of God's covenant with humans (Covey, 1989). Just as God remains faithful despite human failings (2 Timothy 2:13), Covey suggests that consistent deposits of kindness and respect can sustain a relationship through difficult times.

Ellen G. White succinctly captures the essence of God's purpose of human relationships:

“Christ recognized no distinction of nationality or rank or creed. The scribes and Pharisees desired to make a local and a national benefit of the gifts of heaven and to exclude the rest of God's family in the world. But Christ came to break down every wall of partition. He came to show that His gift of mercy and Love is as unconfined as the air, the light, or the showers of rain that refresh the earth...He passed by no human being as worthless but sought to apply the healing remedy to every soul. In whatever company He found Himself, He presented a lesson appropriate to the time and the circumstances. Every neglect or insult shown by men to their fellow men only made Him more conscious of their need of His divine-human sympathy. He sought to inspire with hope the roughest and most unpromising, setting before them the assurance that they might become blameless and harmless, attaining such a character as would make them manifest as the children of God” (White, p. 25).

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#### FURTHER DISCUSSION:

1. In whose image were you created, and for what purpose?
  2. How is the Bible's definition of love different than what the culture in which you live defines love to be?
  3. How healthy are your relationships—especially those in your inner circle—and what will you do to represent Jesus better in them each day?
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# SUPPORTING MALE RECOVERY FROM SEXUAL ABUSE: A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

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BY ALINA BALTAZAR

## THE TEXTS

Luke 17:2, Luke 18:16

This seminar will take about 60 minutes. The anticipated audience is church leaders, child sexual abuse survivors, parents, and mental health professionals.

## INTRODUCTION

In the Greco-Roman culture that Jesus was born into, children were seen as property to be disposed of as their parents wished. In contrast, the Bible presented children as a treasured gift from God (Ps. 127:3). But in the time of Jesus, children were often pushed to the background in Jewish culture.

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Jesus dramatically changed how we view children. He indicated that children have great value and may have spiritual insights that adults lack. Most importantly, Jesus made it very clear that children were not property, had great value, and should never be harmed or exploited! In Luke 17:2, Jesus noted that a severe punishment awaits those who harm or exploit children.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church and many other Christian churches have taken a strong stand against the sexual abuse of children and any type of physical abuse, violence, or sexual abuse. Thus, many in the Christian church are under the impression those types of heinous acts don't happen to members of our churches. Not only can it happen within the Christian home, child sexual abuse (CSA) has occurred at Christian schools, youth church/activity groups, and the church itself.

Sexual abuse of children involves any type of sexual activity with a minor by a person in a position of control or authority (Gagnier & Collin-Vezina, 2016). Being sexually abused as a child by a trusted authority figure, especially by a parent, is harmful in many ways. Children are vulnerable and completely dependent on adults to care for them. When they see that trusted adults can cause harm, the world is no longer a safe place. Research has found higher rates of depression, substance use, suicidal thinking, more likely to abuse children themselves (though the vast majority don't), and marital problems among those who were abused.

There are also spiritual consequences. Within a Christian home, a child may feel guilty for having sex outside of marriage, even thinking it is their fault. If the abuse is by a parent, it can distort a child's view of a loving heavenly Father. Jesus knew how harming a child can have devastating effects when he said, "It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones" (Luke 17:2).

Sexual abuse of girls is well documented and discussed frequently in society. The Adventist church has an **enditnow**<sup>®</sup> campaign to address sexual abuse along with other forms of abuse, but the focus is on women. Though a more significant percentage of girls/women have experienced sexual abuse, national U.S.-based surveys have found that about 1 in 4 women and 1 in 10 men have experienced child sexual abuse before the age of 18 (Gagnier & Collin-Vezina, 2016). This high rate among men is still a public health issue (Deblinger & Heflin, 1996). It has happened to Seventh-day Adventist young men, too. According to a recent survey, among a population of young adult Seventh-day Adventists, 8% of males (1 in 13) and 26% of females reported they experienced unwanted sexual contact before the age of 18. The actual rates of sexual abuse may be higher due to being unaware that sexual abuse has happened when very young and fear of disclosing the abuse to someone.

## PURPOSE

There is often an assumption that males are not negatively affected by sexual abuse (Elkins, Crawford, Briggs, 2017). Males experience similar harm as females who are sexually abused; thus, it

is important to become aware of consequences they may deal with, but also be aware of their unique challenges due to their gender. Not only does the community need to be informed about the harm, but it also needs to be educated about ways to support and aid in their healing.

## UNIQUE CHALLENGES OF MALE CSA SURVIVORS

Men experience unique challenges speaking out about these harmful experiences due to the sexual cultural expectations of men (Alaggia, 2010). Like females, they may be afraid they won't be believed (Rapsey, Campbell, Clearwater, & Patterson, 2020). Those who have been abused as boys by other males may be concerned what others could think of their sexuality. They may wonder about their sexuality themselves. This is particularly difficult within the conservative Christian church context, where marriage is expected to be between a man and a woman. When male minors experience unwanted sexual activity from older females, they may be hesitant to reach out for help because the culture appears to support sexually aggressive females with younger males. As a result, adulthood is the time when men are more likely to disclose their past abuse (Gagnier et al., 2016). Married men who feel pressured into unwanted or harmful sexual activities by their wives experience some distress as well. Men may feel shamed for saying no to any sexual act, even if it is harmful.

In the U.S. and other patriarchal cultures, men are expected to be the main providers and physically strong. This is thought to be especially important in cultures where resources are limited. Men often don't want to admit women took advantage of them sexually due to being perceived as weak. If individuals experiencing sexual abuse don't reach out for help, they are at risk of being victimized again, which can worsen their outcomes and ability to recover.

## IMPACT ON THE FAMILY

These negative life experiences can continue into the dating and marriage relationship. According to research, men who have been sexually abused are more likely to be single, have less empathy toward their partners, have less stable and satisfying dating relationships, and are less likely to be in a serious, committed relationship (Larson, Newell, Holman, & Feinauer, 2007). It can be inferred from some research literature that abused males, compared to non-abused males, are more likely not to feel prepared for the role of a husband due to lower self-esteem and can have difficulty learning to trust their partner. This may be due to an original betrayal of trust that takes place with the sexual abuser (likely a family member or closely associated with the family) (Crowder, 1995). They may also struggle with the ability to feel secure in a relationship, have strong needs for attention and affection, or manipulate others to get their needs met (Olson, 1990). These behaviors naturally occur because of this type of abuse. These problems may make it difficult for a man to develop deep intimacy with a woman, which is required in healthy marriages (Larson et al. 2007). Due to their own anxiety and depression, it can be more

challenging for them to be empathetic towards others, especially if empathy wasn't shown to them when they were young.

Parenting can be negatively affected as well. Men who have experienced abuse in the past, especially if it was done by a parent, may question their ability to parent. Their partner may also doubt their skills. Male CSA survivors may not be aware of their problematic parenting behavior due to not having healthy father role models or not wanting to admit to others their parenting limitations (Wark & Vis, 2018). Past abuse can also motivate a man to be very different from his abusive/neglectful parents and to protect his own children from similar harm. If a man is able to parent well, research has found that it can be a crucial factor in healing from CSA (Wark & Vis, 2018). Male survivors report that finding a new way of seeing oneself is critical in recovery (Easton, Coohy, Rhodes, & Moorthy, 2013).

## RESILIENCY

Though experiencing sexual abuse as a child is very harmful, research has also indicated areas of resiliency among male survivors of sexual abuse (Crete & Singh, 2015). Due to the harm they have experienced in their life, they can develop more mutual empathy, greater trust in trustworthy individuals, and deeper connections with others. Those who have been identified as resilient have been able to reprocess their masculine identity to move beyond the self-blame and problematic societal expectations they may have struggled with when they were younger. Research has indicated that those who have experienced abuse in their past and are able to make meaning of those earlier experiences demonstrate greater resilience through being helpful to others and being intentional in fostering healthy relationships (Kia-Keating, 2009).

Making meaning of past abuse is one of the strengths of Christianity, but the Christian faith can also be challenging for some survivors. Many may ask, "How could a loving God allow children to be abused?" To answer that question, some say, "The harm you've experienced will allow you to be a blessing to others." That may be true. Survivors can understand the pain of someone else who has experienced abuse in ways that the non-abused will never understand, but that doesn't answer the question as to why that person suffered, and someone else didn't. Many survivors may think there is something wrong with him for God to allow such a heinous act to happen to him. As a way to cope, a CSA survivor may turn to sinful behaviors like drinking, using drugs, or sexually acting out, causing more guilt and shame.

For true spiritual healing to occur, the survivor needs to get to know Jesus and who He really is (Dykas, 2020). This may be hard for those who have been abused by a father or within a religious context. It is good to remember that Jesus suffered like humans in similar ways. He understands our pains and hurts. He wants to take that pain away from us; our pain can become His if we allow it, but His resilience, faith, and love also become ours. This exchange process promotes wholeness and healing. It displaces our distress over the past and changes our desires for sinful and past comforts. This allows us to release the emotional pain we have been holding onto to Him because we didn't



think there was anyone safe to release it to in the past or even the present. Holding on to past emotional pain harms us emotionally and physically. When we get to know Christ and His love, we are better able to do this. This can aid in the meaning-making of past abuse, which aids in healing.

There can also be post-traumatic growth after abuse for some. Post-traumatic growth is defined as a “positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with trauma or highly challenging situations” (Tedeschi, Shakespeare-Finch, Taku, & Calhoun, 2018). When a person goes through a difficult time in their life, they may have greater self-awareness, more appreciation of life, and open to discovering new possibilities (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). A closer relationship and more dependence on God can be part of this process.

## TREATMENT

Counselors who treat men who have been sexually abused are able to help men address issues as they relate to relationships.

- Social competence
- Self-esteem
- Communication skills
- Educate his partner to improve understanding of challenges and how to help in overcoming sexual and trust issues.
- Conduct pre-marital counseling

The best way to overcome past betrayal is to develop a trusting, healthy relationship with someone. Sometimes, couples need help to get to that point.

Research has identified ways men benefit from therapeutic treatment (Rapsey, Campbell, Clearwater, & Patterson, 2020). Men need first to be motivated to engage in treatment. It can be difficult for a man to admit he can't resolve his own problems and needs assistance to do so. Survivors have reported that therapy helps them think differently about their abuse experience. Therapy helps them realize that abuse did actually happen, but it wasn't his fault. Developing a connection with their treatment provider aids in that healing.

Christians may feel there is something wrong with their spirituality, and other Christians may say this too if they aren't able to heal through their relationship with God alone. It is important to remember that God sends healers into our lives that the Holy Spirit can work through. Just like how God uses medical doctors to heal physical wounds, God uses therapists to heal emotional wounds. Many Christian counselors will include spirituality as part of the recovery process, as requested by the survivor. Unfortunately, therapy can be expensive, time-consuming, and may take years due to the nature of the severity of past abuse. There are other ways to get support for survivors.

## CHURCH/COMMUNITY SUPPORT

The pastor plays an important role within the church. Where a pastor has to shepherd multiple churches, a lay elder has more of a leadership role in many small churches. When a member struggles with emotional or marital problems, Christians often reach out to their pastors for help. Due to the gender expectations of the broader culture, men may be hesitant to reach out, especially as it relates to sexual abuse. Males are more likely to come forward to the pastor/elder if they think they will be believed and concerns will be taken seriously. It is essential for the pastor/elder to be sensitive to the challenges males in this type of situation are facing. In addition, these disclosures should be kept confidential unless there is a report of neglect or abuse of a child or vulnerable adult; those should be reported to the authorities. Enditnow has an annual conference on various topics of abuse that is available in person or online to better prepare pastors and lay elders to know how to respond appropriately and support survivors. Go to the enditnow website to find out when the next one will be held. In addition, Adventist Learning Communities offers free training on this topic. See references for more information.

Some Christian communities may be hesitant to report CSA to authorities due to having concerns over the harm a false accusation may have on the accused perpetrator. Sexual abuse of children goes against our values, so it is often assumed that people who do that should look and act evil in some obvious way. Those who commit this crime may look like anyone else. They may even be valued members of the community. This can be all part of an act to lure children and their parents into trusting them so they can have easy access to their victim. Though there can be false accusations, those are few and far between. Much more harm is done to the abused if the perpetrator is believed instead. Thus, anyone who reports sexual abuse should be believed until proven otherwise.

Even if authorities do get involved, for males to give details of their sexual abuse to a police officer will be embarrassing. The police officer may be insensitive to their experiences. In addition, it can be difficult to prove sexual abuse if there isn't evidence. Legal cases for abuse victims can be very stressful. These concerns shouldn't stop an abused person from reporting their abuse; it is just important to keep in mind possible challenges that may occur and give them support as appropriate.

Some communities have Child Advocacy Centers that have staff who are trained to investigate sexual abuse allegations when there is limited physical evidence. These are often free to the abused, and they work closely with the authorities to aid in any legal case. There may even be free counseling to address recent or past abuse.

## CONCLUSION

Though rates are lower than for women, there are still millions of men who have experienced sexual abuse at some point in their lives. They suffer similar consequences as women but have some unique experiences related to the cultural expectations of men. The male role of husband and father can

be challenging for those who have survived CSA, but those relationships can also aid in healing. Therapy is beneficial in many ways to help improve mental health symptoms and decrease couple conflict.

Christian communities can be harmful, but it is also helpful to address CSA. Pastors and lay elders need to be educated on the experiences of male survivors of CSA and know how best to support males in their recovery. Believing reports of sexual abuse are critical to address CSA. Christian communities need to be willing to get authorities involved if a crime has been committed, realizing sexual perpetrators can appear as “normal” and even be community leaders due to the nature of their abusive behavior. Authority involvement can be challenging for the victim and perpetrator, but they are the best resource we have on this sinful earth to stop further abuse. We need to remember how precious children are to the Lord and how Jesus wants us to view children as a treasured gift from God.

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### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How do you think your culture’s expectations of men make it difficult for them to disclose sexual abuse? What can you do to try to address these issues?

How might a Christian taboo against counselors make it difficult for a survivor to get professional help? What are ways you have seen people heal from past trauma?

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# CREATING REST: 70 WAYS TO HELP A DYSREGULATED CHILD CALM THEIR AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM

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BY BRYAN CAFFERKY, HEATHER BEESON & ELIZABETH JAMES

## THE TEXT

Psalms 23:1-3, Ephesians 4:2-3, 2 Timothy 1:7, 2 Thessalonians 3:16, Psalm 4:8

## PURPOSE

This workshop will teach parents 70 different sensory-related activities to help their child calm down during times of distress. Parents will learn about their child's autonomic nervous system (ANS), what dysregulation looks like in children, and how to support their child's dysregulation through various sensory experiences. Through interactive presentations and experiential activities, parents will gain valuable insights and practical strategies for offering their children rest during times of distress.

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Upon successful completion of this experiential workshop, participants will:

- Understand how children’s dysregulation is a normal, natural, and biological phenomenon—and that parents can help children tap into their God-given sensory systems to regulate their autonomic nervous system (ANS) during times of distress.
- Internalize the idea that dysregulated children are not bad kids; rather, they are good kids having a difficult time.
- Experience 70 different sensory-related regulation activities, which can help provide rest for children during times of distress.
- Commit to practicing sensory-related regulation activities when the child is not dysregulated so that they can successfully implement these strategies during moments of dysregulation.
- Have a plan to co-create a Calm Down Kit with their child.

**Note:** We recommend that the lead facilitator have some experience in child development and/or parenting education, accompanied by facilitators for different breakout groups (if possible, 10-12 parents per group). The workshop duration and specific activities can be tailored to suit the available time and the needs of the parents. It is important to create a safe and non-judgmental environment for open discussions and experiences.

**Resources Needed:**

- One facilitator per breakout group (10-12 parents in each group)
- Items necessary to experience 2-4 different sensory-related techniques from each of the seven sensory systems, see appendix at the end of this seminar.

## WORKSHOP OUTLINE (~3 HOURS)

### 1. Introduction (10 minutes)

- Welcome, prayer, and introduction to the “Creating Rest: 70 Ways to Help a Dysregulated Child Calm Their Autonomic Nervous System (ANS)” workshop
- Brief Icebreaker activity and ask parents to share one thing they hope to learn during the workshop.
- Group assignment (~12 parents per group) in preparation for Breakout Groups.

### 2. Understanding Child Dysregulation (10 minutes)

- **Definition and Overview:**
  - What is dysregulation?
    - Parents share experiences and observations of times when children become dysregulated.
    - Parents share personal experiences and observations of examples of what happens inside themselves (the parents) when they become dysregulated

- Affirm the parents that this dysregulation is a normal and natural biological process for children (and adults). These children are usually not bad kids; they are good kids having a difficult time.
- Other common signs of dysregulation in children.
- **Causes and Triggers:**
  - Emotional, environmental, and physiological factors contribute to dysregulation.
  - An accumulation of distress, not necessarily the most recent event.

### 3. Autonomic Nervous System (15 minutes)

- **Basics of our Autonomic Nervous System (ANS):**
  - God created our sympathetic and parasympathetic systems to keep us safe. Sympathetic Activation: Perception of a threat (including unmet needs) naturally realigns children into Fight, Flight, Freeze, or Fawn reactions.
  - Parasympathetic Activation: Perception of safety (including met needs) naturally realigns children to “Rest and Digest.”
- **Impact on Children’s Behavior and Emotions:**
  - The Sympathetic and Parasympathetic activation have powerful effects on their physiology in order to prepare them for survival or relaxation.
  - An activated autonomic nervous system naturally results in dysregulated behaviors.
  - In other words, our previous examples of emotional outbursts are the natural extensions of the children’s sympathetic activation.
- **Impact on Adult’s Reaction to Dysregulated Children:**
  - Why are Dysregulated Children so Frustrating for Parents?
    - Parallel Process: A parent’s perception of the threat (a child’s dysregulated behaviors) may result in our own sympathetic activation (Fight/Flight/Freeze/Fawn).
  - We may parent in a dysregulated state when trying to attend to dysregulated children—which affects our ability to think, process, and make good parenting decisions.

### 4. Sensory Processing Needs (10 minutes)

- **Introduction to Sensory Processing:**
  - Each child has their unique sensory processing preferences, which are directly linked with their autonomic nervous system.
  - What are the seven sensory systems?
    - Visual
    - Auditory
    - Tactile
    - Gustatory
    - Olfactory

- Proprioceptive
- Vestibular
- Common sensory processing preferences and differences (e.g., hypersensitivity, hyposensitivity).
- **Sensory Processing Needs and Resulting Behaviors:**
  - Sensory processing issues can impact behavior and daily functioning.
- **Sensory-Related Activities Offer Rest to Dysregulated Children (and Adults)**
  - Meeting a child's sensory needs can help to calm their parasympathetic nervous system (to prepare them for rest and digestion).
  - Parents calmly joining children in sensory-related activities also result in co-regulation, which further facilitates calmness and safety for the child.

*{RECOMMENDED BREAK}*

**5. Breakout Groups (120 minutes)**

- Facilitators help Breakout Groups experience 2-4 sensory-related activities from each of the seven sensory systems. This way, parents can experience a sample of these interventions, which can help distressed children regulate their autonomic nervous system.
- Suggestion: Each Facilitator develops expertise for a few sensory-related activities from one of the sensory systems. Then, the facilitators rotate around the various Breakout Groups.

**6. Wrap-Up (10 minutes)**

- **Feedback:**
  - Participants share what they found most helpful.
  - Parents need to create a Calm Down Kit, which includes some of the child's preferred sensory experiences all in one place.
- **Closing Remarks:**
  - Test and practice these sensory-related activities with your child when they are not distressed so you can use them when the child becomes dysregulated.
  - Encouragement to collaborate with a child to create a Calm-Down Kit.
  - Open to other questions, comments, or concerns.

**MAIN POINT**

Parents can use sensory-related activities to help distressed children regulate their autonomic nervous system (ANS).



## DYSREGULATION

Children's dysregulation is a normal, biological, and expected phenomenon. Dysregulation refers to the difficulty of managing our emotions and behaviors—usually linked with powerful physiological changes. Children show us they are dysregulated in different ways. Some children exhibit external behaviors such as loud outbursts or aggressive (even destructive) behaviors, difficulty during transitions, or impulsive behaviors (Beauchaine, 2012; Ersan, 2020; Liu, 2004; Zeman et al., 2002). Other children may reveal their dysregulation through internalized experiences such as stomachaches or headaches, withdrawal, intense sadness or anxiety, or lack of concentration (Bowie, 2010; Liu et al., 2011; Rapport et al., 2001; Rothenberg et al., 2020). Our long-term goal as parents is to (a) better understand how our children experience dysregulation and (b) help our children repeatedly practice emotional regulation skills so they become increasingly more effective at managing distress.

## ACCUMULATION OF DISTRESS

Each stressor, no matter how small, can contribute to children feeling overwhelmed. Even though some people may blame the last drop of water for causing a cup to overflow, dysregulation is actually the result of an accumulation of stressors which had already filled their cup up to the brim (Cole et al., 1994; Epel et al., 2018; Lampert et al., 2016). Example cumulative stressors might be tension at home or frustrations at school, feeling isolated or misunderstood, feeling too hot, itchy, sick or in pain, disrupted sleep, lack of hydration, nutritional deficiencies, changes in the predictability of their daily routine, cognitive impairments, neurobiological differences, or genetic predispositions (e.g. Brobeck et al., 2007; Cummings, 1994; Evans & Kim, 2007; Hatherly et al., 2023; Keluskar et al., 2021).

Parents may need to look past the most recent triggering event and instead become curious about what might be underneath the surface of the water that is contributing to the child's dysregulation (e.g., Gleib et al., 2007). These are not bad children giving you a hard time; rather, they are good children having a hard time. And the underlying reason why adults become upset with dysregulated children is because we sometimes have difficulty regulating ourselves! (Carrère & Bowie, 2012; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2022).

## AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM (SYMPATHETIC AND PARASYMPATHETIC ACTIVATION)

Children's dysregulation is directly linked to their survival mechanisms of fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. In God's elegant design, He created humans with an autonomic nervous system (ANS) with built-in survival responses in order to help keep us safe (Elbers et al., 2018; McCorry, 2007; Musser et al., 2011). There are two sides to this ANS: the sympathetic nervous system, which prepares us for survival actions, and the parasympathetic nervous system, which helps us "rest and digest."

The perception of a threat (including the perception of unmet needs) results in sympathetic activation, which greatly enhances our body's ability to react quickly and effectively to those perceived threats (Low, 1993; McCorry, 2007). Our body prepares itself to either confront the threat (fight), escape from it (flight), become immobile and unresponsive (freeze), or befriend the potential threat (fawn) (Freeman & Chapleau, 2013; Porges, 2009; Taylor, 2006). This automatic sympathetic activation results in substantial physiological changes, such as increased stress hormones (e.g., adrenaline and cortisol), dilated pupils, increased heart rate, decreased saliva production, and more blood redirected away from our digestive system towards major muscle groups (e.g., Low, 2011). Therefore, when a child perceives there is a threat, their body automatically reorients itself into a survival state—just as God designed.

In contrast, a perception of safety (including the perception of met needs) results in parasympathetic activation, which is accompanied by a cascade of different physiological changes supporting relaxation, digestion, and recovery (e.g., Low, 2011; McCorry, 2007). This parasympathetic activation also results in less stress hormones, constricted pupils, slower heart rate and lower blood pressure, increased saliva, and activation of the digestive tract (e.g., Low, 2011; McCorry, 2007). Therefore, when a child perceives safety, their body automatically reorients itself into a state of rest—just as God intended.

Guess what? Adults have autonomic nervous systems too! Most adults also have a desire to experience calmness, but it can be incredibly difficult to remain calm when someone nearby is not calm. So when parents perceive their child is too loud, too disruptive, or too destructive (or any other undesired emotions or behaviors linked with dysregulation), we might perceive that child's dysregulation as a "threat" to our peace, our comfort, our plans for the day, how other people will perceive us as parents, or how children are expected to behave in our family (e.g. Joosen et al., 2013; McLaughlin et al., 2014; Rutherford et al., 2015). This parallel process between children and parents makes sense biologically: first, children become dysregulated because of their environment, and then that distress is caught by the parents, who also become dysregulated—including the instantaneous physiological changes linked to our own survival reactions (Rutherford et al., 2015)! So, how can we help our children (and ourselves) when they experience dysregulation?

## SEVEN SENSORY SYSTEMS

Children perceive and interact with their world through seven primary sensory systems (Smith, 2008): visual, auditory, tactile, gustatory, olfactory, proprioceptive, and vestibular.

- **Visual System:** visual information provided by the eyes, including shapes, color, motion, and distance.
- **Auditory System:** sound stimuli regarding volume, pitch, and location of sounds.
- **Tactile System:** touch sensations from the skin, providing information about texture, temperature, pressure, and pain.

- **Gustatory System:** distinguishing between different flavors such as sweet, salty, sour, bitter, and umami.
- **Olfactory System:** detecting smells and odors such as fragrant fruit or harsh chemical compounds.
- **Proprioceptive System:** gathering information from their muscles, joints, and ligaments regarding their body's position, movement, and balance.
- **Vestibular System:** gathering information from the inner ear, contributing to overall balance, spatial orientation, gravity, and sense of motion.

It is through these seven primary sensory systems that children will perceive danger or safety—resulting in sympathetic or parasympathetic activation of their ANS (e.g., Malik-Hasbrook, 2023). Certain sensory inputs, such as tactile stimulation (playing with interesting textured materials or deep pressure from squeezing or hugging), proprioceptive input (from activities like swinging or rolling), or olfactory input (smelling the differences between wood, rock, flowers, etc.) can have a calming effect on children (or quite the opposite!). By understanding these seven sensory systems, parents can intentionally provide pleasant sensory-related activities to promote an experience of security and comfort, which helps children regulate their autonomic nervous system (Lynch & Simpson, 2004; Mouton-Odum & Golomb, 2021).

## CHILDREN HAVE DIFFERENT SENSORY PREFERENCES

Each child has distinct sensory preferences, needs, and processing, which means two children may respond dissimilarly to the same sensory stimuli because each child benefits from their unique sensory diet (Camarata et al., 2020; Thompson & Raisor, 2013). For example, some children may experience hyposensitivity (also known as under-responsivity), which is decreased sensitivity or responsiveness to certain sensory stimuli compared to typical children (e.g., Watling et al., 2001). These children may experience an intense desire (sensory craving) for more of a specific sensory experience (e.g., soft, green, or wet). This desire is usually linked to sensory seeking behaviors in order to achieve an increased level of sensory stimulation.

In contrast, other children may experience hypersensitivity (also known as oversensitivity), which is increased sensitivity or heightened response to certain sensory stimuli compared to typical children (e.g., Schulz & Stevenson, 2019; Tomchek & Dunn, 2007). These children may exhibit a protective response (sensory defensiveness) to certain sensory input they perceive as unpleasant or uncomfortable (e.g., itchy, bright, or wet; e.g., Cascio et al., 2016). This reaction to unpleasant stimuli often leads to sensory avoidant behaviors in order to reduce their overall discomfort or distress.

## PLEASANT SENSORY EXPERIENCES PROVIDE CALMNESS FOR A DYSREGULATED CHILD

If parents can better understand their child's unique sensory palate and accompanying sensory needs, then parents can intentionally facilitate preferred sensory activities which offer calmness to their children (parasympathetic response) during times of distress (Lynch & Simpson, 2004; Yack et al., 2002). Even better, if a parent can regularly meet their child's sensory needs, this provides opportunities for the child to regulate their autonomic nervous system before an accumulation of stressors can build up to tip the child into dysregulation (Thompson & Raisor, 2013). Thus, parents can employ sensory-related activities for both prevention and intervention.

If parents can learn to interpret their child's emotional and behavioral outbursts as natural extensions of the sympathetic activation of their autonomic nervous system, then parents can understand the child's underlying need for a sense of calmness in the midst of this dysregulation (Dunn, 2007). Furthermore, by understanding that the child first became dysregulated because of unpleasant inputs to their sensory systems, parents can employ their child's preferred sensory-related activities to access a parasympathetic response to help restore balance to their autonomic nervous system—and, by extension, their emotions and behaviors (Biel & Peske, 2009).

Furthermore, when parents participate with their children in these sensory-related activities, the children also experience the parent-child co-regulation—which is one of the most powerful ways to soothe our autonomic nervous system (Delahooke, 2022; Erdmann & Hertel, 2019). The calmness of the parent provides rest and security for the dysregulated child, which creates a safer emotional space for children to practice their sensory-assisted emotional regulation (CabecinhaAlati et al., 2020; Paley & Hajal, 2022; Stelter & Halberstadt, 2011).

Dysregulation is the natural result of our inability to manage distress (e.g., Cole et al., 1994), but after this workshop, you, as parents, will have the knowledge and experience necessary to help children (and yourselves) become more effective at harnessing our seven sensory systems to help regulate our autonomic nervous system (all part of God's elegant design) in order to manage distress better.

### BIBLICAL INSPIRATION

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake” (Psalms 23:1-3).

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such there is no law” (Galatians 5: 22-23).

“With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:2-3, ESV).

“Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him” (Psalm 127:3 (NIV)).

“Bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also *must do*. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection” (Colossians 3:13-14).

“My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18).

“For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control” (2 Timothy 1:7, ESV).

“Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always in every way. The Lord be with you all” (2 Thessalonians 3:16).

“I will both lie down in peace and sleep; For You alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety” (Psalm 4:8).

“Cast your burden on the Lord, and He shall sustain you; He shall never permit the righteous to be moved” (Psalm 55:22).

## POTENTIAL ONLINE RESOURCES TO CONSIDER

<https://beacons.ai/drbeckyatgoodinside>

<https://www.instagram.com/drbeckyatgoodinside/?hl=en>

<https://drdansiegel.com/book/the-whole-brain-child/>

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# APPENDIX

# SENSORY-RELATED

# TECHNIQUES

## VISUAL: SENSE OF VISION OR SEEING

#	Activity Name	Activity Description	Activity Objective
1	Bubbles	Parent and child take turns blowing soap bubbles and cheer when bubbles fly into the air and eventually pop.	Alternating deep breaths and shared excitement.
2	Clouds	Parent and child safely sit or lie down outside on a mat or blanket. Parent and child lookup at the clouds and identify cloud characteristics (i.e., elephant, nose, face, two hearts, etc.). They also become curious about related ideas - (i.e., What do you like most about elephants? What color are elephants? Where do elephants live? Remember the time when...).	Visual association, creativity, and communication skills.
3	New Observation Walk	Parent and child go on a walk to try to find many “new” things in a very familiar place. For example, they take turns describing a familiar tree but pay special attention to the attributes they have not noticed before. Does this tree have seeds? How green or brown are the leaves and trunk? What is your favorite part of this tree? How tall is the tree? Can you see the top? Are there birds or other creatures living in the tree? How did the tree get here?	Discovery of new details in the familiar and greater awareness of the present moment.

4	I Spy	<p>Parent and child take turns identifying objects in their immediate environment and then guess what the other person sees. For example, the parent could “spy” a favorite toy of the child and encourage the child to ask questions to help them guess the toy:</p> <p>Child: “Is it red?”          Parent: “No, it’s not red...”          Child: “Is it blue?”          Parent: “Yes!”          Child: “Is it round?”          Parent: “Yes!”          Child: “Is it my bouncy ball?”          Parent: “Yes!”</p> <p>Parent and child can take turns celebrating the correct guess, spying new objects, and interacting with the objects.</p>	<p>Visual focus, noticing attributes, and listening to cues.</p>
5	Picture Book	<p>Parent and child “read” a familiar picture book but make up their own story instead of reading the words! They take turns contributing to the made-up story (and dialogue) corresponding to the book pictures. The parent also helps the child process relevant powerful emotions (e.g. being curious about how a character is feeling or how the character responded to the situation).</p>	<p>Connecting the pictures with a new co-created story and safely exploring powerful emotions</p>
6	Floating Objects	<p>Parent and child find a clear, empty bottle or jar (8-16 oz capacity) with a lid. Parent and child find small shiny objects (i.e., beads, glitter, sequins, confetti) that could fit through the opening of the container. Parent fills approximately <math>\frac{3}{4}</math> of the container with water or vegetable oil, and then adds a few drops of food coloring. Child then safely drops the objects into the container. Parent tightly seals the lid, and child then shakes the container; they watch the objects move around the container.</p>	<p>Mutual engagement to co-create a calming visual stimulation.</p>

7	Sink or Float?	Parent and child locate a container (6-10 inches deep). Parent fills the container with water. Parent and child search their environment for a variety of objects to place in the water. Parent prompts the child, "Sink or Float?" Then, they place the object in the water. This activity may also be conducted during bathtime.	Mutual engagement and curiosity, with accompanying visual stimulation.
8	Photo Memories	Parent and child locate photos and either engage in a dialogue about the photo (i.e., recalling the period of time, related life events or family dynamics, and other memories associated with the photo) or just sit together and look through the photos in silence.	Mutual engagement and interaction while supporting visual memory, attunement to affective responses (facial expressions), emotional responses (feelings), communication skills, and visual stimulation.
9	Drawing Nature	Parent and child locate paper and drawing utensils (i.e., pencils, pens, markers, etc.) and go outdoors. Parent and child engage in drawing various items in the natural environment (i.e., tree, lake, playground, insects, flowers, cars, sky, etc.).	Mutual engagement and interaction while supporting visual stimulation.
10	Silly Ball Catch	Parent and child play catch with a ball while standing, sitting, swinging, rolling, and even catching between legs. They can make silly facial expressions, or animal sounds with every ball that is tossed	Mutual engagement while promoting visual memory and supporting both visual and vestibular stimulation.

**AUDITORY: SENSE OF LISTENING OR HEARING**

#	Activity Name	Activity Name	Activity Objective
1	Drum Search	Parent and child use different objects around the home as if they were drums. Drumsticks	Auditory processing of new sounds and joy of

1	Drum Search	may be pens, chopsticks, sticks from outside, spoons, or other hard objects. Drum surfaces may be tables, floors, counters, doors, or other hard surfaces. Parent and child describe the different sounds they hear from the objects. They can hum or sing together while drumming.	discovering different drumming objects.
2	Can You Hear Me?	Parent and child find different objects to hold near their own mouths to muffle the sound of their own voice. These objects could be leaves, pillows, stuffed animals, blankets, sticks, etc. It is important that objects do not obscure their ability to breathe, only that they change the way their voice sounds. Parents and children exchange different affirmations and loving statements. For example, a parent may hold a pillow in front of their face and say, "You're a great kid!" The child may hold a stuffed animal in front of their face and say, "You're a great parent!" They can describe the way different objects muffle their voices.	Builds attunement and good listening skills.
3	New Sing-along (children with verbal processing skills)	Parent and child create new songs together by alternating verses. Parent sings an opening verse and encourages child to continue the song by singing the second verse. The pitch can vary with the content of each verse. For contrast, one verse sung in a low tone might be "It's a tough day being a kid," followed by an upbeat tone, "But we can get through tough days together."	Alternating between parent and child encourages listening to one another and continued collaboration. Changing the tone allows ongoing processing and connection between the sound of the song and the resonant feelings.
4	Hum-a-long (kiddos with fewer verbal	For children with fewer verbal processing skills, humming can be an alternative to singing, with parent and child taking turns humming in different tones.	Helps the child to express (hum) how they are feeling, and parents attune to these

4	processing skills)	Parents can adjust their facial expressions to match the tone, such as having a sadder expression when humming a low note and a happier expression when humming a high note.	feelings (without verbal processing).
5	Clap-a-long	Parent and child use their hands to take turns clapping various rhythms together. A parent invites the child to copy their rhythm; then, the child asks the parent to copy their rhythm. To increase attention and engagement, the parent can hold the pauses for shorter or longer periods of time between claps and adjust their facial expressions to heighten or lower the regulation state.	Heightens mutual engagement and listening skills (auditory processing).
6	Guess the Sound (child)	<p>Child safely covers their eyes or looks away. Parent finds a variety of ways to make sounds (see list of options below). Then the child guesses how that sound was made.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Whistling</li> <li>· Drumming with fingers</li> <li>· Snapping fingers</li> <li>· Blowing a bubble</li> <li>· Sharpening a pencil</li> <li>· Hammering</li> <li>· Tearing paper</li> <li>· Shaking a filled water bottle</li> <li>· Unwrapping candy</li> <li>· Clapping</li> <li>· Ringing doorbell</li> <li>· Knocking</li> <li>· Slamming a book closed</li> <li>· Tap on window</li> <li>· Bounce a ball</li> </ul>	Heightens mutual engagement, listening skills (auditory processing), communication skills (verbal processing), and environmental awareness.
7	Guess the Sound (sequential option)	Child will safely cover their eyes while parent makes a sound (see previous activity) and child guesses the sound. After the child correctly identifies the sounds, the parent will make two different sounds in a sequence. Slowly increase	Heightens mutual engagement, listening skills (auditory processing), communication skills

7	Guess the Sound (sequential option)	the different number of sounds in sequence until child loses interest or engagement. Parents and children can also reverse roles.	(verbal processing), and cognitive functioning while promoting interactive and environmental awareness.
8	Animal Sounds	Parents and children pretend like they are different animals and can only communicate by making those animal sounds (no human talk!). Try to communicate how the animal is feeling by the sounds that it makes.	Creation of silly sounds and heightens attunement to emotions behind the communication
9	Hide-n-Seek (timer)	Parent hides a metronome, ticking clock, music box, or kitchen timer somewhere nearby. Child then seeks the object by locating the sound. If needed, the parent can use proximity prompts such as “you’re getting warmer/colder/hot...” when child is closer or farther away from the object.	Heightens mutual engagement and listening skills (auditory processing) while promoting interactive and environmental awareness.
10	Hide-n-Seek (parent whistle)	Parent and child go to an outdoor environment. Parent hides and either whistles or blows a whistle. Child will then seek parent by following the whistling sound to find where parent is hiding.	Heightens mutual engagement and listening skills (auditory processing) while promoting interactive and environmental awareness.

### TACTILE: SENSE OF TOUCH OR FEELING

#	Activity Name	Activity Description	Activity Objective
1	Touch & Feel Treasure Hunt	Parent hides various objects that can be identified as warm, cold, hard, soft, prickly, smooth, rough, fuzzy, bumpy, etc. Parent will prepare the child by indicating the first item for the “Treasure Hunt” (i.e., “Let’s look for a rough rock.”). Parent can provide proximity	Heightens mutual engagement and interaction while promoting tactile stimulation regarding

1	Touch & Feel Treasure Hunt	clues (“You are getting warmer/colder”). Once the object is found and celebrated, parent and child can explore the weight, texture, and overall sensation of that object.	how various objects feel when touched.
2	Water Play	Parent identifies a safe water source such as a hose, bowl, or basin. Parents bring different objects such as fabric, plastic, wood, rocks, or other items that look or feel different when wet. Parent and child observe changes in the dry object versus the wet object and explore the sensation of water (cold, warm, slippery, heavy, etc.). Fun splashing is also allowed.	Curiosity and attunement to sensory differences between dry and wet objects.
3	What’s Inside?	Parent and child collect 3-5 various items that can be safely identified as warm, cold, hard, soft, prickly, smooth, rough, fuzzy, bumpy, etc. Without the child observing, safely cover each item with a box or other type of enclosure with an opening for hand/arm - this will serve as a blindfold effect. With the parent’s encouragement and verbal support, “You can do it!” “I wonder what it will be?” the child will safely immerse their hand/arm into each enclosure (one at a time), touch/feel each item, and guess what each item might be.	Heightens attention and mutual engagement while promoting tactile sensory awareness.
4	Leaf Time	Parent takes a leaf (or a feather) and asks the child to sit with their eyes closed. Parent uses the leaf to gently touch the child’s head, shoulders, arms, legs, back, feet, and hands. The child tells the parent which body part the leaf is safely touching. Parent and child can reverse roles.	Heightens attention to safe sensory experiences by practicing safe and calming touch.
5	Sand (or Dirt) Sketch	Parent and child find a safe outdoor space where there is sand or dirt. By locating a stick or using one of their fingers, child sketches their name, letters, shapes, numbers, etc. in the sand or dirt. Parent then “guesses” what the child has drawn.	Heightens attention and mutual engagement while promoting tactile sensory stimulation and awareness.

6	Sensory Bin (dry or wet)	Parent places objects and toys (such as sand, rocks, dry rice, dry beans, spoons, toys, etc.) into a container such as a box (dry) or basin (wet). Parent and child play with the objects sometimes filling cups and then spilling the contents of the cup onto the back of the other person's hands.	Heightens tactile sensation and attention to the different shapes, textures, and sensations within the sensory bin.
7	Shaving Cream Sketch	Parent and child find a safe space with a flat (preferably smooth) surface. Parent will dispense some shaving cream onto the flat surface. Child will use their finger/hand to sketch their name, letters, shapes, numbers, etc. in the shaving cream. Parent then "guesses" what the child has drawn.	Heightens attention and mutual engagement while promoting tactile sensory stimulation and awareness.
8	Draw on my back	Child sits or lays down on the floor. Parent uses their finger/hand to gently "draw" different shapes on the child's back. Child tries to guess these shapes. Child and parent can switch roles.	Heightens attention to sensory experiences on their back.
9	Slime Squish	Parent and child can make slime together and squish the slime in different forms. To make slime, the parent uses a bowl to mix 8 ounces of washable school glue, 1 teaspoon of baking soda, and 2 to 3 tablespoons of saline solution. If the slime starts to harden, add more saline solution as needed to make the slime a desired texture. This will require additional mixing, kneading, pulling, stretching, etc.	Fun, tactile activity that promotes parent and child teamwork.
10	Slime or Clay Treasure Hunt	Parent hides small objects (e.g. toys) in the slime or clay (like play dough). The child then must manipulate the slime or clay to find the toys. Parent asks questions about how the child's hands are able to sense the objects inside the slime or clay. This treasure hunt can also be done blindfolded.	Provides focused activity for sensory exploration and curiosity.



## GUSTATORY: SENSE OF SOUND OR TASTE; USE OF ORAL MUSCLES

#	Activity Name	Activity Description	Activity Objective
1	Sound Mirror	Parent makes a sound with mouth and child then repeats (mirrors) the parent’s sound. This can continue for as long as the child maintains mutual interaction, attention, and engagement. Parent may use a variety of tones, paces, pitches, volumes, and inflections. For example: “bah,” “bah, bah,” “bah, bah, baaaah,” “bah, bah, baaaah, bah”	Heightens attention and mutual engagement while promoting auditory awareness, verbal coordination, and oral stimulation.
2	Melt	Parent selects a safe food item (i.e., chocolate, sugar, cracker, small ice chips that can sit or slowly dissolve on the child’s tongue (or they may close their mouth if they prefer). The child then patiently waits for the food to sit or dissolve. Parent and child talk about which things melt fast, which things melt slowly, which things do not melt, how they know when an object is melting or not, and the overall sensory experience. Parent can bring a mirror if the child is curious about what it looks like inside their mouth.	Heightens attunement to various mouth experiences while promoting patience and calmness in the moment.
3	Bowl Bubbles	Parent brings a large bowl, water, dish soap, and a straw. Parent adds 3 cups of water to the bowl with 1 teaspoon of dish soap. Parent demonstrates how to use a straw to blow bubbles inside the bowl. Child then creates their own bubbles with the straw. (Note: it is important for the parent to monitor that the child does <b>not</b> suck through the straw and drink the mixture.)	Stimulates the gustatory muscles while promoting oral, olfactory, and visual stimulation and sensory awareness.
4	Copy Cats	Parent makes different silly faces and the child copies those facial expressions. Parent and child can reverse roles and give names to especially funny expressions. Parent and child can use these specific silly faces during times of distress.	Heightens attention and mutual engagement while promoting gustatory (oral) stimulation and visual coordination.

5	Cotton Ball Blow	Parent acquires a cotton ball and a straw (or pursed lips). Parent demonstrates how to blow air out through the straw to move or push the cotton ball across a surface. Parent and child can create little obstacle courses to move the cotton ball in and around.	Promotes gustatory (oral) stimulation and sensory awareness, as well as visual coordination.
6	Cotton Ball Race	Parent acquires 2 cotton balls and 2 straws (or pursed lips). After a little practice, parent and child engage in a cotton ball race—either simultaneously racing against each other or cooperate together by taking turns blowing the same cotton ball across the surface across the “finish line.”	Heightens attention and mutual engagement while promoting gustatory (oral) stimulation and visual coordination.
7	Tasty Finger Painting	Parent acquires a variety of smooth-textured food (edible) items such as: yogurt, apple sauce, sour cream, pudding, baby foods, etc. On a clean table or tray, child finger paints with the various food (edible) items. As the child finger paints, they can taste the flavors and describe their experience.	Promotes gustatory (oral) stimulation and sensory awareness, communication skills, and visual coordination.
8	Hungry Caterpillar	Based on the book <i>The Very Hungry Caterpillar</i> by Eric Carle, child (and parent) pretend they are the “very hungry caterpillar” and taste or eat similar same food items mentioned in the book (Apple, Pear, Plum, Strawberry, Orange, Chocolate Cake, Ice Cream, Pickle, Cheese, Salami, Lollipop, Pie, Sausage, Cupcake, Melon, Lettuce). As the child tastes or eats the food items, they describe their experience.	Promotes gustatory (oral) stimulation and sensory awareness and communication skills.
9	Sweet or Salty?	Parent acquires a small amount of sugar and salt and places them each on two plates without the child knowing which plate has the salt or the sugar. The child licks one finger presses it onto the sugar, and describes how it looks, smells, and feels. Child then licks another finger, presses it onto the salt, and describes how it looks, smells, and feels. The child makes an initial guess about which plate has the sugar or	Promotes gustatory (oral) stimulation and sensory awareness and communication skills.

9	Sweet or Salty?	salt, and then puts one of their fingers in their mouth to taste—and then the other finger. Child then describes how the sugar and salt are the same or different, what each can be used for, what kinds of foods they eat that are sweet or salty, and which is their favorite.	Promotes gustatory (oral) stimulation and sensory awareness and communication skills.
10	Tasty Memories	Parent and child ask each other questions about what specific tastes/foods remind them of certain memory memories. For example, “What does ____ remind you of?” Some tastes/foods may include: hot cocoa, fried rice, bubble gum, popcorn, cold water, noodles, ice cream, bananas, coconuts, spicy peppers, and cake.	Heightens attention and mutual engagement while promoting gustatory sensory awareness and visual memory.

### OLFACTORY: SENSE OF SMELL

#	Activity Name	Activity Description	Activity Objective
1	Garden Adventure	Parent takes child outside to an outdoor area (garden or park) to find and smell various flowers, plants, and shrubs. Parent supports child in describing unique smells and describing other qualities of the objects. For example, flowers are colorful, soft, and smell sweet; while dirt is typically less colorful, smells earthy, and can be firm, coarse, or soft.	Heightens curiosity and awareness of subtle smells and other experiences.
2	Cooking	Parent and child engage in cooking either a favorite or new food together. The goal is to experience the sensory process of cooking, rather than to cook a full meal. This may be as simple as toasting bread or preparing rice. Parent and child smell ingredients along the way, describing the smell, and describing the change in smell as the food is prepared. Parent and child then eat the food together (because hunger can often inhibit emotional regulation).	Brings a purposeful sensory (olfactory) perspective to an otherwise mundane task and creates bonding.
3	Guess the Scent	Parent and child collect 8-10 various household items that are fragrant and safe (i.e., flowers,	Heightens attention and mutual

3	Guess the Scent	fruits, vegetables, spices, candies, chocolates, etc.). The child safely closes their eyes as the parent safely holds each individual item up to the child’s nose to have them “guess the scent.” Please be cautious regarding certain items (such as hot spices) which might be painful to a child’s nose or eyes.	engagement while promoting olfactory sensory awareness and communication skills.
4	Guess the Scent (alternate)	Parent acquires 6-8 household items: fragrant (perfume, cologne), fruity (melon), citrus (lemon), herb (mint, basil), sweet (candy), pungent (onion, garlic), chemical (laundry detergent) and nutty (peanuts or peanut butter). Parent places a small amount of each item into a small container or bowl. Parent labels the container or bowl with the category name: fragrant, fruity, citrus, herb, sweet, pungent, chemical, and nutty. Child then smells the container or bowl to guess what item it is.	Heightens attention and mutual engagement while promoting olfactory sensory awareness and communication skills.
5	I’m Thinking of...	Parent describes the scents and smells of certain foods or objects, and the child has to guess what they are thinking about. Parent and children can reverse roles.	Promotes curiosity and attunement to olfactory information that is linked to pleasant experiences.
6	Scented Memories	Parent and child ask each other questions about specific and unique scents that remind them of a certain memory. For example, “What does ____ remind you of?” Some scents may include: hot cocoa, fried rice, bubble gum, popcorn, cold water, noodles, ice cream, bananas, coconuts, spicy peppers, and cake.	Heightens attention and mutual engagement while promoting olfactory sensory awareness and visual memory.
7	Spicy Painting	Parent acquires a variety of spices from the kitchen such as cinnamon, clove, ginger, paprika, pepper, salt, and cumin. Parent selects one spice - child then smells and describes it. Parent then helps child mix a tablespoon of the selected spice and water in a small bowl. Child smells the mixture and describe if it has changed or remained the same. Using their finger or a	Heightens attention and mutual engagement while promoting olfactory sensory awareness and stimulation.

7	Spicy Painting	paintbrush, child draws pictures on a piece of paper or a hard waterproof surface. Please be cautious about certain spices which may irritate certain children's skin.	
8	Grocery Store Scent Hunt	Parent and child create a list of specific fragrant items to find at a local grocery store (i.e., fresh bread, flowers, cantaloupe, bananas, strawberries, bell peppers, lemons, basil, parsley, and coffee bags). Parent and child go to the grocery store and begin the scent hunt. Once an item on the list is located, the child describe its smell. The goal is to find all items on the list.	Heightens attention and mutual engagement while promoting olfactory sensory awareness and stimulation, communication skills, and visual stimulation.
9	Let's Hunt Scents (categories)	Parent and child create a list of fragrant <i>categories</i> (i.e., fragrant, fruity, floral, citrus, herb, sweet, pungent, spice, chemical, and nutty). Parent and child begin the scent hunt in search of specific items that belong in these different categories. The goal is to find, smell, and describe the olfactory sensation for at least one item in each of the identified categories.	Heightens attention and mutual engagement while promoting olfactory sensory awareness and stimulation, communication skills, and visual stimulation.
10	Smelly Bath	Parent and child collect a basket of fragrant flowers to be used for the child's bath. Parent and child smell the flowers and talk about how this changes the bathtime experience.	Heightens attention and mutual engagement while promoting olfactory sensory awareness.

**PROPRIOCEPTIVE: SENSE OF DEEP PRESSURE OR HEAVY WORK**

#	Activity Name	Activity Description	Activity Objective
1	Making Food	Parent pretends that they are making their child into a food item. For example, the child lies on a flat surface, and the parent uses their hand to "spread butter" onto the sandwich, chop up vegetables on their back, makes them into a pizza etc.	Creates experiences of deep pressure and imaginary play and direct attention from the parent.
2	Baby Blanket Roll Up	Parent acquires a large, soft or soothing blanket and spreads it on the ground. Then the parent	Creates a fun, playful game, that gives a

2	Baby Blanket Roll Up	gently squeezes and rolls the child up into the blanket. Parent pretends the child is a little tiny baby. Then the parent gently unrolls child from blanket, using care to ensure that child does not roll too fast or too far.	gentle pressure from a snug blanket, taps into the parental memories of caring for the child when they were a baby, and then the added excitement of being unrolled.
3	Baby Bongos	Parent gently pats the child on their tummy, back, hips, legs, and arms—noting the different percussion sounds. Parent asks child to describe the feeling of the pats on different parts of body such as jiggly feelings in tummy, vibrations in chest from back pats, etc.	Patting can be a soothing experience for children and allows parent to give sensory input with their hands that gives loving touch and provides desired pressure input.
4	Stacking	Parent (and child) identifies several safe objects (i.e., pillows, stuffed animals, towels, and small blankets) to stack on child while child lays down. The weight should not be excessively heavy, but child should be able to sense the change in pressure as the stack grows. Parent assists the child in counting the number of objects and use the repetition of counting to support soothing.	Gives gentle pressure and awareness of the experience of different weights and objects on the body. This pressure can be soothing, and the gradual stacking can allow the child to identify the “perfect” amount of pressure.
5	Seated Squeeze	Child sits on ground, couch, or chair. Parent sits directly in front of and facing the child, so the child’s feet are wrapped around the parent’s body. Parent asks child, “Are you ready to be squeezed?” Parent waits for child to respond. On the count of 1, 2, 3, the parent carefully leans back to “squeeze” child in seated position and applies deep pressure. The interactive component begins when child indicates “more,” “stop,” “again,” or even “my turn.” Parent can switch places to have child squeeze parent in seated position.	Heightens attention and mutual engagement while promoting body awareness, communication, and proprioceptive deep pressure. Coordination, and vestibular stimulation.

6	Hand Wall Push	Find a safe and sturdy wall (or strong tree trunk). With parental guidance, the child will use the palms of their hands to push the wall with all of their strength while the parent counts up to 10 (or 5). Children can also try doing several wall pushups, exhaling deep breaths when pushing away from the wall.	Promotes body awareness, deep pressure, and proprioceptive stimulation.
7	Foot Wall Push	Find a safe wall (or strong tree trunk). With parental guidance the child will sit on the ground, place the bottoms of their feet on the wall with their knees bent, and push the wall or flat surface with all of their strength while the parent counts up to 10 (or 5).	Promotes body awareness, deep pressure, and proprioceptive stimulation.
8	Arm Floats	Parent places hands on child's arms in order to squeeze the child's arms to the side of their body, while child pushes back against parent's arms, attempting to raise arms. Parent counts down from 10 (or 5) and then releases and child lets arms float up. Parents must be careful to ensure that child feels safe with this squeezing and does not feel trapped. This should give a deep pressure in arms that is released and can be accompanied by deep breaths (perhaps the release of frustrations).	Gives a tense and release experience that can be soothing and stress reducing. In addition, deep breaths are regulating.
9	Pressure Prayer Hands	Parent and child put palms together in prayer hands. Both push their hands together as hard as possible, counting down from 10 and releasing. Accompany this with deep breaths, varying intervals of pressure (e.g., 2 seconds on, 2 seconds off in quick pulses), and stretches up and down with prayer hands (e.g., maintain pressure and lift hands as high as possible without losing pressure, then move hands as low as possible).	Models a soothing position while giving pressure input for both parent and child.
10	Jump Slams	Parent and child jump as high as they can landing firmly on their feet, crouching down with strong legs, and jumping again. Ensure both parties are physically well enough for the impact of the jump and that care is taken to be sure there is no risk of falling.	Offers repeated deep pressure in the lower body.

**VESTIBULAR: SENSE OF MOVEMENT**

#	Activity Name	Activity Description	Activity Objective
1	Body Mirror	<p>Parent makes a movement with their body (or a body part) while verbalizing the action and child then repeats (mirrors) the parent's movement. This can continue for as long as the child maintains mutual interaction and engagement. The parent can use a variety of postures, stances, gestures, and facial expressions. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• verbal - "hands up;" action - both hands up above head</li> <li>• verbal - "shake left foot;" action - lifts left leg from the ground and shakes left foot</li> <li>• verbal - "touch toes;" action - bend over, touch left toes with tips of left fingers/hand and touch right toes with tips of right fingers/hand</li> <li>• verbal - "do the twist;" action - place left hand on left hip, place right hand on right hip, and twist lower torso left to right</li> </ul>	Heightens attention and mutual engagement while promoting body awareness, coordination, and vestibular stimulation.
2	Super Baby	Parent safely lifts child up (as possible) and places child in a superhero position with hands outstretched and legs straight while parent holds torso of child. Parent then "flies" the child around, making whooshing noises—inviting the child to also make "whoosh" breathing sounds to facilitate deep breathing. Child can also fly as a rocket ship, an airplane, or an eagle.	Promotes body awareness and deep breaths.
3	Dance Party	Parent puts on music and invites the child to dance. Parent can demonstrate different movements for different songs. Parent invites the child to lead the movements, and the parent follows the child's lead. Parent and child take turns leading the movements together.	Reconnects parent and child and models appropriate attunement and turn taking.



4	Let's Swing	<p>(Note: This activity requires two adults.) Take a large blanket or sheet and lay it on the ground. Have the child safely lay down on the blanket or sheet - the child's legs and arms should not go beyond the edges. The two adults (parents) stand at opposite sides of the blanket or sheet and grab two corners or ends of the blanket or sheet. They then lift up just enough where the child (in the blanket or sheet) is above ground level (as if the child was lying in a hammock). When safe, the two adults (parents) swing the blanket or sheet with the child in it. The adults (parents) say "1, 2, 3," then swing the blanket or sheet left to right (back and forth). Have the child indicate "more," "stop," or "go." And to add suspense, withhold the "3" or "go" before swinging.</p>	<p>Heightens attention and mutual engagement while promoting body awareness, communication, vestibular movement and stimulation. By implementing the additions, the child may feel empowered to engage in the activity from an alternate perspective - giving them the power and control over the timing of the swing.</p>
5	Tag	<p>Parent and child play a game of tag together where parent and child take turns chasing each other. When one person touches the other person, they are "it" and take the role of the chaser, while the other person runs away. Many variations of tag can be played; just be sure to have intentional pauses for everyone playing to take deep breaths.</p>	<p>Encourages confidence, laughter, anticipation and turn-taking.</p>
6	Stretch it Out	<p>Parent and child take turns leading deep stretching or yoga poses (i.e., touching toes, touching hands behind back, lifting arms as high as possible, and sitting and leaning far over to one side). When parent and child stretch, both should breathe deeply</p>	<p>Alternating turns leading these stretches models give and take and deep stretches provide relaxing sensory input.</p>
7	Shake the Wiggles Out	<p>Parent helps child to name parts of their body that need to "shake the wiggles out". Child independently shakes that part of their body (i.e., quickly shaking their hands, arms, feet, or legs). Alternatively, the parent may gently shake that part of the child's body with them, taking care not to exert too much force. Parent and child can make fun noises as they shake out parts of the body.</p>	<p>Promotes awareness of sensations that the child needs to attend to in their body.</p>

8	Travel Around	Parent and child can take turns creating new and fun ways to move around. For example, they may stomp like an elephant, scoot while seated on the floor, roll like a log, crawl like an ant, and slither like a snake.	Encourages different ways of moving the body, creativity, and turn-taking.
9	Magic Carpet Ride	Parent finds a large piece of fabric (rug, towel, or blanket) for child to sit on while parent pulls the fabric (with child) around. The parent can carefully vary the speed as the child sits or lays down (head closest the side the parent is pulling from). The parent can also sway from side to side, spin around, or vary the type of movement. Please be careful not to start too quickly or turn too sharply in order to protect the child from hitting their head if they fall off the blanket. A slow pull still provides a calming sensory experience.	Creates fun and various sensations of movement.
10	Teeter Totter (Forward and Back)	Parent and child sit on the ground across from each other with their legs stretched out and the bottoms of their feet pressed against each other. Parent and child grab each other's hands and move their bodies in sync forward and back in a teeter totter movement. Parent can say "1, 2, 3" or before initiating the movement. Child can indicate "more," "stop," or "go," which offers them the power and control over the timing of the movement.	Heightens attention and mutual engagement while promoting body awareness, communication, vestibular movement and stimulation.

# EXPLORING CREATION AND HUMAN SEXUALITY

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BY CÉSAR AND CAROLANN DE LEÓN

## THE TEXT

Genesis 1:26-27

## SEMINAR OVERVIEW

In this seminar, we will explore God's design for human sexuality and how the Fall resulted in destructive consequences that have affected and shaped this experience through the centuries. We will discuss how God's image can be reflected ontologically and vocationally through all aspects of our human relationships, including our sexuality.

## INTRODUCTION

God's intended design for expressing and experiencing ourselves as sexual beings first within an emotionally caring, trustworthy family and, later, in a loving, person-centered relationship. Sexuality and spirituality are intricately connected and must not be separated (Balswick & Balswick, 2014). We were created as sexual beings. Giving and receiving love and experiencing sexual pleasure is an intricate part of human life. Sexuality is a core component of our human experience. It plays an important role in a person's physical health. From the beginning, God created humanity, male and female, reflecting His own image. "Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our

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likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:26-27 NIV).

Theologically, human sexuality can only be understood as a reflection of God’s design for creation. Since we believe that God created our sexuality, the deepest meaning and understanding we can find can best be discovered by returning to the Creator-Designer’s realm.

## FUNDAMENTAL BIBLICAL VIEWS OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY

- Male and Female are different genders in God’s plan (Gen. 1:27).
- Let’s keep in mind that Eve comes to her existence because of Adam’s sacrifice in giving up one of his ribs (Gen. 2:21). Therefore, authentic sexuality is expressed in an atmosphere of love and sacrifice (Eph. 5:25-33).
- Both Adam and Eve were instructed to be fruitful, to subdue the earth, and to rule over the rest of God’s creation (Gen. 1:28), implying that God had created them to procreate through the sexual oneness experience.
- Our sexuality is good in God’s eyes. (God saw all that He had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day” (Genesis 1:31 NIV).
- There is differentiation, distinction, complementation, and harmony between the sexes.
- Human sexuality is a gift meant to take us to deeper levels of knowing and being known (ourselves, others, and God) (Gen. 4:1).

Sexuality is ontologically rich because it is also informed by the following factors:

- |              |               |
|--------------|---------------|
| 1. Biology   | 6. Attitudes  |
| 2. Gender    | 7. Values     |
| 3. Emotions  | 8. Culture    |
| 4. Thoughts  | 9. Our family |
| 5. Behaviors |               |

## WE EXPRESS GOD’S IMAGE ONTOLOGICALLY AND VOCATIONALLY THROUGH OUR SEXUALITY

- Ontologically: We coexist, harmonize, love, cohabit, fructify, multiply.
- Vocationally: We make a commitment (covenant), extend grace, empower, and experience holistic intimacy with our spouse.
- Gender and sexuality find their greatest expression in a mutually loving marriage (1Cor. 13).

- Sexual intimacy is a divine construct, broad and deep, because it symbolizes the mysterious union between Christ and His church (Eph. 5:30-33). It takes place through the transcendent act—marital oneness/sexual intercourse.
- *Sexuality embodies our physiological and spiritual identities.* Men and women are both bearers of the image of God.
- Sexuality and spirituality are intrinsically connected and should not be separated. (Adam and Eve, being created in the image of God, were created with gender and the faculties to be sexual human beings with the ability to procreate children).

### GOD'S PLAN FOR HUMAN SEXUALITY

- God's intended design for expressing and experiencing sexuality occurs within a mutually loving, other-centered monogamous marriage that enjoys an emotional, spiritual, and physical bond sealed by a lifelong covenant commitment.
- We were designed with an innate capacity to experience sexual arousal and pleasure within the context of a marital relationship.
- God's intended design for expressing and experiencing ourselves as sexual beings occurs first within the context of an emotionally caring, trustworthy family and, later in our development, within a mutually loving and respectful marriage relationship.
- "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral" (Heb. 13:4).

### POST-FALL SEXUALITY

- The Biblical account doesn't end with the creation story. It is followed by the fall. From Genesis to the New Testament, we witness the effects of the fall on human sexuality.
- Depersonalized, body-centered sex seems to be hijacking relationship-focused sexuality in our current culture.
- The interplay between social attitudes and beliefs, cultural structures, and biological factors shapes the inauthentic sexuality inherent in our fallen human condition (Balswick & Balswick, 2014, p. 217).

### THE MEANING OF SEXUALITY HAS CHANGED THROUGH THE AGES

- **1625-1660 Puritan Era:** Sex was considered good. Monogamy and marital fidelity were appreciated.
- **1800s Victorian Era:** Everything that appeared to be sexual was repressed, including sexual desires. Women were not to experience sexual desires during intercourse. Sexual desires were pathologized.

- **1920s:** Sex became permissive and effective.
- **1940s:** Sexual revolution: Exploratory curiosity ruled. Sex became more recreational and devoid of emotional attachment. Women were sexually objectified. Playboy magazine appears (December 1, 1953).
- **1980s:** Women recognized that they had been robbed of the intimate emotional aspect of sexuality. The issue of virginity resurfaces. A growing fear of the AIDS epidemic and venereal diseases generated certain sexual self-consciousness. “I like sex, but I’m not willing to die for it.”
- **2000:** Witnessed a growing acceptance of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, with LGBTQ+ rights gaining more mainstream visibility and support. There was an increased openness in discussing sexuality, partly fueled by the internet and social media, which provided platforms for sex education, exploration, and expression. Hook-up culture became more prevalent, especially among young adults, facilitated by the rise of dating apps and changing attitudes towards casual relationships.

## A DISTORTED SEXUALITY

Modernism and post-modernism left us with a very humanistic and reductionistic view of sexuality, where human sexuality emerges as part of a complex interactive process of development between biological and sociocultural factors.

- The Fall fractured every aspect of our humanity, including our sexuality. We all have wounds that need healing as the struggle takes place to express authentically—and when appropriate, repress—our sexuality in relationships.
- The Fall makes achieving authentic sexuality involve conflict and struggle for everyone.
- Aspects of our post-fall brokenness are evidenced in our home through distorted views about our sexuality, as are reprehensible acts of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse and neglect.
- Our broken family structures, along with other broken social and community structures, have contributed to the distortion of God’s original intent for human sexuality.
- Some people suffer from generational trauma and epigenetic deficiencies in the genetic package they have inherited.
- Some experience sexual brokenness due to unhealthy socialization in the home and community.
- Some are victims of social injuries such as rape, pornography, and sexual abuse.
- Some are victims of highly toxic and abusive parenting and peer maltreatment.
- God’s purpose for human sexuality has been totally distorted and in dire need of redemptive healing and restoration.

“Parents leave maladies as a legacy to their children. As a rule, every intemperate man who rears children transmits his inclinations and evil tendencies to his offspring; he gives them disease from his own inflamed and corrupted blood. Licentiousness, disease, and imbecility are transmitted as an inheritance of woe from father to son and from generation to generation, and this brings anguish and suffering into the world and is no less than a repetition of the fall of man” (White, 1951, p. 173).

## SEXUAL BROKENNESS

- Sexual brokenness can take a variety of forms as a result of various types of generational trauma experienced through familial, sociocultural, biological, and spiritual influences.
- When individuals have the disadvantage of living through traumatic circumstances that result in devastating sexual breakdown, especially when sexual encounters have been early and non-consensual, deep emotional scarring can make sexual healing a long-term process.
- Some individuals have sexual curiosity and just want to experiment and follow cultural trends.
- Some individuals are born with genetic variances that are reflected in their physiologically complex gender package.

## THE DIVINE IDEAL FOR OUR SEXUALITY REMAINS

- The sexual authenticity God intended for us is a goal worth striving for.
- “Authentic sexuality *is most attainable* for those who are born with a “normal” genetic and physiological makeup, who are socialized in a home where parents display healthy attitudes toward sexuality, and who live in a community where social values are consistent with biblical teaching” (Balswick & Balswick, 2014).
- Because the meaning of sexuality is highly informed by sociological factors, it is imperative that our families and our Christian communities live out and display God’s plan for human sexuality.
- “The more the various groups to which the individual belongs consciously reflect God’s ideal for sexuality, the more internally coherent will be his development of authentic sexuality” (Balswick & Balswick, 2014, p. 22).

## SUMMARY

### AUTHENTIC SEXUAL EXPRESSION

- It is expressed in the midst of a committed, covenant relationship called marriage (Matt. 19:4-6).
- It necessitates an atmosphere of grace because as sinful beings, we make mistakes that require us to experience and extend forgiveness (Eph. 4:32).
- Authentic sexual expression is enriched through mutual empowerment (The two become one flesh) (Gen. 2:24; Eph. 5:28-33).

- Authentic sexual expression reaches its total fulfillment in authentic and complete oneness intimacy. Marriage oneness image mysteriously reflects Christ and his Church (Eph. 5:30-33).
- According to the Scriptures, any sexual activity outside of a committed marriage relationship defies God’s design and purpose for human sexuality. In sexual activity outside of marriage, commitment is usually uncertain, empowering tends to be conditional, and holistic (emotional, physical, and spiritual) sexual intimacy can be elusive.
- God is most glorified when our role as an “image-bearer” is our primary vocation. By His grace alone, we can become intentional about exemplifying the theological constructs that God communicates and shares with his broken-by-sin children. Just like God covenants with us—we must keep the covenants we make with each other. Just as He showers His grace over us—we must shower grace over others. Just as He empowers us—we must be willing to empower each other. And just like He seeks intimacy with us—despite our fallen condition—we must be willing to foment and sustain intimacy with our less than perfect spouses.

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### GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR THIS SEMINAR

To help us further explore the concepts we’ve discussed today, let’s break into groups and consider the following questions...

1. How can understanding God’s design for human sexuality help individuals navigate the complex cultural shifts surrounding sexual expression today?
  2. What role does a strong family foundation play in shaping one’s views on sexuality and spirituality, and how can this be restored in modern times?
  3. In what ways can the church support individuals in healing from sexual brokenness and guide them toward experiencing authentic, biblical sexuality?
  4. How can Christian parents proactively counter the influence of secular culture on their children while maintaining respect for differing viewpoints?
  5. What are practical ways parents can help their children develop critical thinking skills to discern biblical truth from conflicting cultural messages?
  6. In what ways can Christian communities support parents in reinforcing traditional values in an increasingly secular world?
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# PARENTING BOYS

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BY WINFRIDA ANETH MITEKARO

## THE TEXTS

Psalms 127: 3, John 14: 1-3, 2 Peter 3:12-13,  
Proverbs 22:6, 19:18, Deuteronomy 6: 4-9, 20-25,  
Judges 2: 7, 11-16

## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

This seminar aims to help parents prepare their sons to live independently and upright when they are grown, developing into responsible men. To help them become ambassadors for Christ in the family, church community, and society and later inherit eternal life.

**Materials Needed:** Laptop, Projector, and PowerPoint software

## INTRODUCTION

Parenting comes with privileges and responsibilities. It is the greatest responsibility that God assigned to human beings. As parents, we are answerable to God and not to man. Unfortunately,

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the devil directs many arrows toward our children, especially when they are in the adolescent stage of development. The devil does this to paralyze the advancement of God's Kingdom. Parenthood is overwhelmed with what the world offers to our children and the risky choices children make.

Terence Chatmon (2024) had this to say about parenting.

“One of the primary challenges facing Christian parents is the pervasive influence of secularism and cultural relativism. In a world where traditional Christian values are increasingly marginalized or even vilified, parents may struggle to instill and reinforce these values within their children. Secular culture often promotes messages that conflict with Christian teachings on issues such as marriage, sexuality, and the sanctity of life. Consequently, parents must proactively counter these messages by equipping their children with a solid understanding of biblical principles and helping them develop critical thinking skills to discern truth from falsehood.”

This seminar intends to remind Christian parents that children are not born here on earth to stay; God has prepared a better home for all His faithful children (John 14: 1-3, 2 Peter 3:12-13). While waiting for the fulfillment of the promise, parents need to help children strengthen their moral compasses as they travel here on earth and become the light to the world. It takes determination to engage in diligent parenting since it is not an easy task. This is how Tim Challis (2018) puts it; “Parenting is tough. One of our greatest challenges is to raise kids who are able to exist in this world while not being of this world... So as parents, we want to protect our children, yet we also try to raise them so they can exist and thrive in this messed up world.”

Referring to parents' responsibility, Ellen G. White emphasizes, “The world is full of snares for the feet of the young. Multitudes are attracted by a life of selfish and sensual pleasure. They cannot discern the hidden dangers or the fearful ending of the path that seems to them the way of happiness” (*Ministry of Healing*, p.185).

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### GROUP ACTIVITY

Ask participants to give examples of God's values compared to the World's values.

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## EXPLORING BOYS

### WHY ARE WE FOCUSING ON BOYS?

For a long time, society has been focusing on protecting, empowering, and uplifting girls, and for sure, they need this attention because they have been neglected, marginalized, and less privileged in many societies of the world. However, in the process of uplifting girls, boys were, in many ways, neglected and believed to be secure. Boys also need proper care, love, and protection.

Leaving them to be taught by the world has led the world into a chaotic situation. Ologi (2021) states, “Most gender equality campaigns focus on protecting girls while forgetting that boys also grapple with insecurities.” This experience has impacted families, society, and the church in unforeseen ways.

Parenting a boy has unique needs and can sometimes present challenges that may be overlooked or neglected. These needs that are not easily noticed require consistent parental attention for a healthy development of masculinity. Failure to address a boy’s unique need may lead, but not limited to a:

- Failure to adapt to the changing cultural roles that require men to take on new responsibilities.
- Lack of adequate preparation for young men to become leaders of their families, a role that is highly expected in many cultures. It is crucial to properly prepare these young men for this leadership role since it is not automatically given to them.
- The failure of fathers to take responsibility and lead has led to unhappy and divided homes and nations.

Prov. 19:18 "Chasten your son while there is hope" encourages parents to give focused attention to raising boys and preparing them to be leaders in their family, the Church, and society.

### **THE UNIQUE CHALLENGES OF AN ADOLESCENT BOY**

1. Due to peer pressure, adolescent boys more likely to be involved in many risky behaviors such as bullying, substance abuse, reckless driving, aggression, pornography, low self-esteem, and making bad decisions and choices. Each new generation adds a few more stumbling blocks on their path to successful adulthood.
2. Adolescent boys are predisposed to experiencing mental health problems like depression, anxiety, or self-esteem issues. Still, they might be less likely than girls to seek help because boys disclose less information about their lives, which makes it hard for parents to know the areas they need help.
3. The adolescent turmoil makes it difficult for boys to concentrate or focus in classrooms, leading them to struggle academically and perform poorly. This condition has contributed to joblessness, hopelessness, and life without purpose for many young men, leaving them unprepared to become future heads of families.
4. According to Nilsson (2016), boys have weaker bonds with their parents, weaker social control, and they experience lower levels of family-related protective factors. As a result, they have higher levels of offense compared to girls. Ologi (2021) explains it this way; “Parents are more concerned about the whereabouts of their daughters in the evening than their sons. This is based on the assumption that boys can take care of themselves. This has led to boys getting involved in drug abuse and joining gangs.”

5. Fathers tend to be distanced from their teenage boys. Some become power rivals with their sons as intergenerational home conflicts escalate. This condition leads to adolescent rebellion, identity confusion, violence, or substance abuse due to a lack of a listening ear from their immediate family members. Most tend to rely only on peer influence for understanding and care, which, in turn, misleads them most of the time.
6. It has been observed that boys like experimenting and taking risks, just as Westwood states; “Use of alcohol and marijuana is prevalent in the adolescent population. Males are more likely than females to binge drink (five or more drinks at one time) and drive a vehicle while intoxicated” (Westwood, 2008).

These and many more unique challenges of raising boys indicate that they need the support of their parents more than ever. Healthy relationships, understanding, patience, and care can make a difference in the lives of adolescent boys. It is time for parents to realize the neglected side of parenting.

## UNDERSTANDING THE TEEN YEARS

Both adolescent girls and boys experience physical and emotional changes in their development. The process of their brain development affects all their emotional reactions; they learn via trial and error and, most of the time, experience the consequences of their mistakes.

- Adolescent boys need understanding, care, and unconditional love as they go through the turbulence of physical and emotional changes. Parent’s involvement in the life of an adolescent is vital.
- Adolescents experience increased pressure from social media in this generation. They are bombarded with so many voices and information, some of which are harmful and destructive to their identity formation.
- At this stage, adolescents are neither children nor adults. They are in the transition period from childhood to adulthood.
- Adolescents are in the fifth stage of their psychosocial development, that Erick Erickson calls Identity vs. Identity confusion in psychosocial development. It is a stage of seeking to know who they are by exploring their interests, roles, values, and direction (Trips, 2024).

Unfortunately, during this time, adolescents are also expected to make significant life decisions and choices about career, values, religion, hobbies, etc. which some later regret when their judgments become more stable. Proper guidance and regular healthy conversations with parents can lessen the undesired outcome of adolescent thinking, attitudes, and actions, which are a result of evil forces and physiological and emotional changes that are going on in their minds and bodies.

## GOD'S INSTRUCTION TO PARENTS

In Deuteronomy 6: 4-9, 20-25, God instructed Israelites to teach their children diligently in order to preserve their faith. He insisted that even when they were among the gentiles, they would not lose sight of who they were as His people. They were supposed to tell their children about the goodness of the Lord.

Unfortunately, the word of God in Joshua 24: 31 and Judges 2: 7, 11-16 suggests that the Israelites failed to follow God's instruction; they did not pass on the faith of their fathers to their offspring.

As a result, there were bitter consequences for the generation that did not know the mighty works of Jehovah because they were influenced by the world of that time.

Ellen White shares this advice for parents;

“God holds the parents accountable for disregarding His command to separate themselves and their families from these unholy influences. While we must live in the world, we are not to be of the world. We are forbidden to conform to its practices and fashions. The friendship of the ungodly is more dangerous than their enmity. It misleads and destroys thousands who might, by proper and holy example, be led to become children of God” (*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 32-33).

## PREPARING ADOLESCENT BOYS FOR SERVICE HERE AND FOR ETERNITY

As Moses said before Pharaoh, no family member is expected to remain behind, “We will go with our young and our old; we will go with our sons and daughters” (Exodus 10: 9). Our children are not born for eternal destruction, they are born for a purpose: To serve Him here and hereafter. Our homes should be a preparation ground for eternal life. Before the gospel is preached anywhere, it should be heard first in the homes of Christians.

Ellen White wrote:

“While here on earth, children need to have their physical needs attended to, they need education and successful life. Although these are good gifts for our children let us remind them not to lose focus and be trapped in the things of this life at the cost of eternal life. Eternal interests depend upon the course our children take in this life, and parents should be in earnest in giving them correct lessons from their babyhood up. This is a work that has been greatly neglected by many parents, and it is one in which the Lord would have decided reforms made. He desires that our children shall be trained to render obedience to all His requirements” (*Manuscript Releases* vol.10, p. 101).

In this journey, parents must model Christian character to their Adolescent children. Children may argue with what their parents tell them, but they will never argue with their parents' noble character because actions speak louder than words of the mouth.

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### **GROUP ACTIVITY**

Discuss in groups the expectations expressed in the word of God and explore the current reality in the homes.

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## **THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN PARENTING**

The church has been given a divine mandate to nurture the development of children and help them grow up with morals. The church is strategically positioned to do this duty through its ministries such as Sabbath School, Children's Ministries, Youth Ministries, Adventist Education, and Family Ministries. If each ministry intentionally pays attention to the development of children in the church through its programs, children will be shielded from many harms the world brings their way.

Parents are encouraged to do their best at home, diligently teaching them the way of the Lord, helping them to be actively involved in church programs, and send them to Adventist schools where they will be exposed to the Adventist philosophy of education that prepares young people for life here and a better life in Heaven. To this, Ellen White gives this advice:

“In planning for the education of their children outside the home, parents should realize that it is no longer safe to send them to the public school and should endeavor to send them to schools where they will obtain an education based on a Scriptural foundation. Upon every Christian parent, there rests the solemn obligation of giving to his children an education that will lead them to gain a knowledge of the Lord and to become partakers of the divine nature through obedience to God's will and way” (*Child Guidance*, 304.1).

## **GUIDING THE ADOLESCENT BOYS TO FIND THEIR MORAL COMPASS**

The teen years are a critical time to help adolescent boys develop a solid sense of right and wrong. This is the time they are seeking their identity. It is not by parents imposing principles but only through teaching, role modeling, dialog, friendship, and prayer. To achieve this, parents need to win the adolescent's friendship and trust; this process starts in the early years of the child's life and continues to develop as they mature.

Adolescence is dominated by feelings rather than reasoning; therefore, their moral orientation is dominated by how they feel. For this reason, a clarification of values is vital in parenting. The role of parents is to provide boundaries. Again, moral values do not begin in the teen years; rather, they are a result of a long process from infancy. Ellen White exclaims, “The youth should begin early to cultivate correct habits of thought. We should discipline the mind to think in a healthful channel and not permit it to dwell upon things that are evil” (Mind Character and Personality (vol. 2), p. 657.1).

The best example of a well-established moral compass is seen in the life of Joseph and also in the three Hebrew Boys. They lived the words that Ellen White describes in this statement; “The greatest want of the world is the want of men—men who will not be bought or sold, men who in their inmost souls are true and honest, men who do not fear to call sin by its right name, men whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the pole, men who will stand for the right though the heavens fall” (Education, p. 46).

## OBSTACLES TO PARENTING

Any noble job cannot go without obstacles and so it is with parenting. These obstacles can paralyze the spiritual, cognitive, and even physical development of our children. Some of these obstacles are, but not limited to:

- The great controversy
- Maturation
- Social Media influence
- Parents overload
- Peer pressure
- Marital Conflict.

Regardless of how these obstacles are introduced to the parenting process, they all can threaten the parenting exercise. The good news is that the word of God is full of promises to encourage parents in their journey; some of these promises are found in Philippians 1:6, 4: 6-7, Proverbs 22:6, and Isaiah 54: 13. God is faithful to all His promises.

## GOD’S GRACE IN PARENTING

There is no perfect parent in this sinful world. Parenting can be a tough role to play and can often seem frustrating, impossible, and fruitless; no matter how much we try, by our own strength, parenting our kids will always be a challenge. It is true that parents are expected to discipline, teach, nurture, and guide. Still, with all these, effective parenting is impossible without God’s grace.

Our children are sinners being parented by sinful parents who are also constantly under the enemies' attack. It is only comforting because the promise is given: "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'" (2 Corinthian 12:9).

We may fail in parenting our children, but God will never fail to be a gracious, loving, effective heavenly Father to us all. Where we are flawed, He fixes, restores, and empowers us to be better the next time. Effective parenting may often seem impossible, but with God, nothing is impossible. Just like how the pleading voice of the Holy Spirit prompted the prodigal son to come to his senses and return to his father's house (Luke 15:17-24), God can still bring back our children who have strayed back to a loving relationship with Him; for He is a God of a second chances.

We live in a world that is often seen as immoral. It is not an ideal environment for raising children who understand the importance of living a righteous life and the temporary nature of our existence. Although God provides us with abundant grace, parents must recognize their responsibility in raising children with strong moral values. As parents, we are accountable for instilling in our children a deep understanding of God's authority and the standards of our eternal home in heaven.

## THE ROLE OF MEN IN THE HOME

Regardless of our cultural backgrounds, the word of God instructs men to be heads of their families and priests in their homes (Ephesians 5:23; Job 1:4-7). They are expected to lay sacrifices morning and evening for their families so that Satan will not find his way into the home. Being the head or leader of the home does not mean to be the boss of the home, the wife, and the children. It means to be a servant-leader, one who emulates the leadership of Jesus (Ephesians 25-30). In many cultures of the world, girls are well prepared for homemaking and motherhood, while boys are expected to know their way to fatherhood and priesthood; but stable homes can be best realized if boys are also prepared in their roles as men. The way back to the Alter needs to begin with men because converted men tend to shepherd their households well. Women have difficulty standing for the truth in their family if men are not interested. As a church, this is the right time to think about better preparing boys for Christian manhood.

## CONCLUSION

Parenting is a God-given responsibility. God commands parents to do this work diligently because the evil influences surrounding the younger generation are great. It has been observed that boys have unique needs that parents need to pay attention to. Many homes with violence, increased crimes in our neighborhoods, and low self-esteem are partly the result of the neglected parenting of boys. It is also undeniable that the image of the church largely reflects the men we have in the church since many are in leadership roles. If a boy is well prepared for his journey of physical, mental and spiritual development, he will have a well-established moral compass, and many families will be better prepared for eternity.



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# LEADERSHIP RESOURCES

— *Leadership Resources* are carefully selected to assist you in addressing current and relevant family issues with your local church.

# WHY CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE IS VERY GOOD!

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BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

The Bible establishes the foundation for marriage in the story of creation. Marriage exists because God designed it and instituted it in Eden. Scripture portrays marriage as the foundational structure of community for human beings and the family that grows out of it—raising children together, developing and sustaining mutual respect for one another, loving God together, and the privilege of ministry in behalf of others. These and many other reasons signal why Christian marriage is very good. To be sure, the only portion of God’s creation that He evaluated as *not good* was that man was alone.<sup>1</sup>

Adam and Eve were created on the sixth day of creation.<sup>2</sup> And while the story of their marriage is told in Genesis 2,<sup>3</sup> it really took place that very first Friday in Eden.<sup>4</sup> Marriage, therefore, is very good, because God made it so and then said that it was so. If God said marriage is very good, then it is indeed truly good.

Ellen G. White frames marriage as it should be when she exclaims, “The family tie is the closest, the most tender and sacred, of any on earth. It was designed to be a blessing to mankind. And it is a blessing whenever the marriage covenant is entered into intelligently, in the fear of God, and with due consideration for its responsibilities.”<sup>5</sup>

For marriage to be *very* good, all who enter its privileges must understand that it is of sacred origin—a gift from God to humankind—that they may become familiar with the joy of altruistic

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companionship, as they enter the experience of oneness, completeness, and complementarity with another human being, referenced so exquisitely by the apostle Paul.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, let us be clear that human marriage since the fall— even Christian marriage— is not perfect. The truth is that there are no perfect marriages, because there are no perfect people. Still, Christian marriage can be *very* good, despite its limitations and shortcomings. After all, it is the presence of Christ that makes marriage Christian. In addition, commitment to Christ's values, along with His power to enable spouses to produce the fruit of the Spirit,<sup>7</sup> is what makes Christian marriage *very* good, and a conduit to bring honor and glory to God.

When God blessed the marriage of the first couple—Adam and Eve—one of the qualities that made it very good was the ability to have children,<sup>8</sup> to share with them values and a love for God.<sup>9</sup>

Regardless of how long a couple has been married and how committed they are to each other, it is not unusual for one of the spouses—or both of them—to inadvertently say or do something that is misunderstood by or hurts the other. Something ignored may one day emerge as a point of contention between a couple and cause a disruption in their relationship if they are unable or unwilling to forgive and come to grips with how to handle the matter in the days ahead.

One such moment emerged some time ago when I—Willie—felt that Elaine should have made up our bed one morning after being the last one to get out of it. I thought she had fallen down on the job, and I told her so after returning from my morning run and finding the bed unmade. Elaine was gracious. She validated my feelings. But later she challenged me on the merits of my observation, indicating that after being married for as long as we had, it would have been rather effortless for me to make up the bed when I found it unmade.

It took but seconds for me to recognize my blunder, and apologize in embarrassment. The truth is, Elaine does so much more for our marriage than I do. Day in and day out she works diligently in behalf of our relationship without complaining and without the need for recognition. But I thought I could call her out on a matter of little consequence I could have easily taken care of myself. Right then and there I decided—and told Elaine so—that for as long as I lived I would gladly make our bed without complaining, regardless of who was the last to get up. Elaine has done so much for our marriage already, and such a contribution to our marriage is very small in comparison to the big picture of our lives together.

While such gaffes are regularly present in Christian marriage, the values of forgiveness, patience, and kindness—when operationalized— help such relationships to rightsize, rendering them very good. Because of this reality we are able to share such an experience while finding ourselves in a very healthy and satisfying Christian marriage relationship today.

Marriage today is a far cry from God's original intent when He declared in Genesis 2:18, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him." And yet, it is what has given and continues to give—albeit with enormous deviations—stability, dignity, and a measure of morality to cultures and societies all over the world.

We hasten to share that because Christians are human, their marriages are very good, as declared by God, yet they are not instantly all that they need to be when the wedding takes place.

What makes Christian marriage very good is the presence of Christ, as referenced by Ellen White.<sup>10</sup>

Family sociologist Linda Waite and journalist Maggie Gallagher suggest that the war on marriage during the last few decades of the twentieth century has been one between competing values.<sup>11</sup> They also indicate that “despite the startling rise in divorce, cohabitation, and unwed parenthood, marriage remains a core value and aspiration of many Americans.”<sup>12</sup> In fact, these authors proffer that when it comes to their own goals, “ninety-three percent of Americans rate ‘having a happy marriage’ as either one of the most important, or very important objectives.”<sup>13</sup>

Even as Waite and Gallagher offer plausible empirical postulations about push and pull factors that make meaningful marriage so incredibly difficult to achieve, what makes Christian marriage *very* good is the ostensible acceptance and understanding of the biblical notion of “two becoming one.” After all, quoting from the creation story in Genesis 2:24, Jesus asserts in Matthew 19:6 and Mark 10:8, “So then, they are no longer two but one flesh.” And the apostle Paul quotes Jesus in Ephesians 5:31 when he states, “And the two shall become one flesh.” Of course, this view of oneness is central to the Christian understanding of marriage. The challenge here, though, is that because Christians are humans, what comes naturally is the proclivity for selfishness—to defer to one’s own opinions and desires at the expense of the other’s. A part of this continuum is also the fear that being married may mean losing control of one’s life or feeling trapped in a situation that is much less desirable than anticipated.

We believe that what is true about genuine spiritual life is also active in authentic Christian marriage. As the Gospel writer tenders in Mark 8:35, “for whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it.” What we are indicating, then, is that Christian marriage is only really Christian when it carefully abides by the canons of the relational ethic advanced in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament—often in the words of Christ Himself.

So, Christian marriage is a relationship in which both spouses seek to follow God’s blueprint for their relationship. It is viewed as a covenant of spiritual unity where both spouses are joined to God and with God into a “threefold cord” that is not quickly broken, affording direction and meaning in the promise of love (Eccl 4:9–12; Eph 5:31–32).

The spiritual joining of husband and wife in Christian marriage is based on a covenant, also known as a promise or pact. Covenants are meant to operationalize a permanent union between God and His people, between Christian believers, as well as between a husband and his wife. The relationship between God and Abraham was initiated the repository of our deepest hopes and wishes to forge stable families, to find lasting love. On the other hand, we fear being ‘tied down’ or ‘trapped’ and jealously guard our right to redefine ourselves and our lives, with or without our partners’ consent.” and sustained through such a covenant,<sup>14</sup> and the relationship between Christ and His church is also based on a covenant.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the relationship between a Christian husband and his wife is established and continued by a covenant (Mal 2:1–4). So, a marriage based on this kind of covenant is one that has chosen to go the distance regardless of disagreements and disappointments that may emerge during the course of the marriage. It is the kind of marriage that brings stability and security to both spouses and the children in the family.

Christian marriage is also regarded as being honorable,<sup>16</sup> upholding three primary functions: 1) to bestow lifelong companionship for the shared enhancement, delight, and dedication of each spouse;<sup>17</sup> 2) for the pleasure of the spouses through sexual delight<sup>18</sup> in addition to the bearing of children;<sup>19</sup> and 3) to serve as the base for parenting and the administration of the family.<sup>20</sup>

From the beginning God meant for Christian marriages to be mono-gamous, distinguished by a relationship of fidelity.<sup>21</sup> Christian marriage is also characterized by an assumption of permanence (Matt 19:3–9) and commitment (1 Cor 7:10–15), and is exemplified by love (Song 1:16; 8:7; Eph 5:33) and respect (Eph 5:31; 1 Pet 3:7).

To be sure, the institution of marriage begins with God's creation of people. Given that we are made in God's image (Gen 1:26), it would be logical to conjecture that God would also want to meet all of our basic necessities. Hence God created man and woman, blessing them both when He declared, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28).

Despite the fact that Christian marriage is very good, every married couple will experience some difficult times in their marriage. Humans are not perfect, so we make mistakes. Often there is the issue of competition—where each spouse wants to show that he/she is smarter, makes more money, comes from a more stable family, is better educated, and is simply more frequently right! Sometimes there are issues of power, control, and abuse. In addition, couples often experience financial conflicts, poor communication between them, and fear of losing one's identity because of the strong and overbearing personality of their spouse. Many refer to their own or someone else's marriage as "dysfunctional." So, how does one know whether one's marriage has reached the point of dysfunction or just going through inevitable challenges that are part of the natural flow of married life?

When the word "dysfunctional" is used with reference to relationships, it denotes a breakdown of that which is normal. Even in Christian marriage it is normal for two flawed human beings to disagree. Hence, every Christian marriage has the potential to become dysfunctional if couples fail to look out for the inevitable challenges that will arise in their relationships. Of course, couples should avoid using that kind of language to characterize each other's behavior, given its potential to further damage their relationship and escalate disagreements.

Frequently, couples disregard problems by concentrating more on the current event that has emerged, rather than having an understanding about the actual concerns facing them each day. Unfortunately, most couples wait until their antipathy for one another is so deep that they quit behaving as a team and begin to live separate lives. At this point, however, the marriage relationship is obviously in trouble and in need of good Christian professional help to assist them in identifying areas of concern and teach them skills to build on their strengths and common values. Of course, if you live in a place where Christian counselors are not available, committing to reading together a good book on learning to communicate well in marriage could help a couple rightsize and feel like they are on the same team again.

To be sure, there are other elements that push a relationship toward dysfunction—including abuse, addictions, abandonment, and psychological disorders such as depression, anxiety, and other clinically assessed personality disorders. Many marriages are suffering from dysfunction

because spouses have quit communicating with each other and are either reluctant to manage their differences with genuine love and respect, or ignorant of how to do so. They opt for yelling and screaming at each other rather than finding useful answers together to help their marriage become more functional. As a result, they quickly head to the divorce attorney alleging “irreconcilable differences.” It is important, then, for couples to be deliberate about developing better patterns of relating to each other, including practicing being grateful for the value their spouse brings to their daily existence, and managing expectations that are often way outside the realm of reality. Of course, premarital education/counseling could help mitigate many of these difficulties by providing a more realistic perspective to married couples about what is likely to happen when one lives in close relationship with another human being as one does in marriage.

We propose that marriages that are truly Christian learn to do what they can to diminish destructive or negative patterns in their relationships. Each partner concentrates on what they can do to be a healthier spouse, spending more time considering the positive qualities of the other, and the reason their marriage is worth fighting for. Also, couples who are keen on what they can give to enhance their marriage relationship, rather than focusing on what they can get from it, develop healthier patterns of relating that bode well for the success of their marriage.

When we work with premarital couples, we ask them to list twelve reasons why they love their intended and want to marry him or her. We advise them to keep their lists in a safe place, and to look at them when difficult times emerge, as an aide memoire of what it is they loved about each other. More often than not, those reasons still exist but get submerged under the bog of daily living.

So, the good news is that Christian marriages can put the functionality back into their relationship. Instead of choosing to exist with dysfunction that leads to greater frustration, contempt, and isolation, they can decide to fight for their marriage.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, it will demand that couples begin to regard their marriage as worth improving and saving. These couples will need to develop a new way of thinking about their marriage and their spouse in order to change the trajectory of their relationship.

We have said it before and we will say it again: there are no perfect marriages because there are no perfect people. Yet, most Christian couples have the capacity to experience the oneness God intended for marriage, and to have their relationship restored to what they envisioned on their wedding day, if they believe in the grace and power of God.<sup>23</sup>

The following seven useful behaviors can help any Christian couple get their marriage back on track. Spouses who are disposed to try at least one of these recommendations will undoubtedly experience immediate improvement in their marriage relationship.

## **STOP LABELING YOUR MARRIAGE AS DYSFUNCTIONAL**

The human brain is wired to believe what we tell it. If one keeps saying one’s marriage is dysfunctional, one will begin to believe it. We often prompt people to ask themselves whether they have a good marriage with some dysfunctional times, or if they have a lousy marriage with a few

good times. It is a case of the proverbial “glass half full or half empty” reality. Couples who view their marriage as a glass that is half full tend to be optimistic about what they have in their marriage and see possibilities for growth in the future. The converse is also true: couples who see their marriage as a glass that is half empty concentrate on the deficits in their marriage and tend to see only gloom and doom for their relationship in the days ahead. So, if you start telling yourself that you have a wonderful marriage, you and your spouse will begin to believe it and will more likely live it too. The truth is, any marriage can be turned around if the couple believes in it and is willing to commit to making their marriage grow stronger. Those in a good marriage will stop labeling their relationship as “dysfunctional.”

## **PRAY TOGETHER WITH YOUR MATE FOR YOUR MARRIAGE EVERY DAY**

God, the Creator, invented marriage. Therefore, it is not only wise but enormously essential to keep Him at the center of your marriage. We do not mean for married couples to simply pay lip service to this concept. Rather, we encourage couples to establish and maintain a meaningful relationship with God by engaging in frequent prayer and Bible study, while persistently acknowledging His presence in their lives. Ask God to heal your marriage and then expect a miracle. God is able to do “exceedingly abundantly more than we can ask or imagine, according to the power that works in us” (Eph 3:20). We also challenge couples to believe God is present while they are speaking to one another, so they can become more conscious of the way they speak to each other before the God of the universe. Especially as we appeal to God every day to forgive us of our sins and to favor us with His grace and mercy, how can we do less for our mate? God promises that if we humbly seek Him when we pray, He will hear us, forgive us, and heal our brokenness (2 Chr 7:14). So, in a good marriage, spouses will pray together every day.

## **LEARN AND PRACTICE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

This may seem obvious and intuitive. However, this is not instinctive or easy at all. While all of us have learned how to communicate since birth, most of us have developed faulty or erroneous methods of communication. We learn how to communicate in our families of origin and we bring those patterns—good and bad—into our marriage. In addition, what worked well in one’s home or with friends may not work in a marriage with one’s spouse. Each partner needs to be willing to make adjustments in their own relational and communication styles in ways that can enhance the quality of the relationship. Most disagreements happen in marriage because the spouses are talking over each other and neither has stopped to listen to the needs, wants, and hurts of their mate. A fair number of problems in marriage are not really problems. Many issues can be resolved by taking the time to listen to each other and seeking genuine understanding.<sup>24</sup> There is plenty of wisdom in James 1:19, which states, “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” (NIV).



To implement the message of James 1:19, couples should develop a framework of communication that is committed to listening first and talking second. To listen first means to practice active listening, which means summarizing what one's spouse is saying, to convey one has heard and understood what the other is attempting to communicate. The partner who is speaking should also be committed to using "I" messages rather than "you" messages. This technique will help lower the tension between partners and help create an atmosphere of genuine concern and the desire to resolve differences. For example, if one partner has developed the pattern of being late to events they have agreed to participate in, the injured partner can ask for a meeting to talk over issues they are concerned about. It is important to be flexible and allow for the partner being invited to a meeting to express when is a good time to meet. Once the meeting time has been established and the spouses are ready to speak, the injured partner may begin by saying, "Thank you for making the time to meet with me; I appreciate that very much. I want you to know I feel hurt and taken for granted when we agree to go to the park at four o'clock and you are not ready when the time comes." If approaching with a "you" message, the partner may have said, "You are always late, which shows your lack of maturity and responsibility." Obviously, the first approach is less threatening and confrontational and will make for better communication and resolution. Of course, the partner who is listening attentively may respond to the first approach by saying, "I am hearing you say you feel disappointed when we agree to do something at a certain time and I often fail to keep our agreements." Notice that instead of being defensive, the spouse who is listening summarizes what the other one is saying, because the objective here is to convey to the injured partner that they heard and understood their concerns. To practice these types of communication skills, attending a marriage retreat where communication skills are being taught or reading a good book on active listening can help any couple improve their communication abilities and manage conflict with greater success.

## **FIND OUT AND DO WHAT YOUR SPOUSE LIKES; QUIT WHAT HE OR SHE DOES NOT LIKE**

Prior to marriage, people take great pride in being their best selves—the best boyfriend or the best girlfriend. They pull out all the stops to find out what the other person likes, then shower that person with their heart's desires. However, after the wedding and the honeymoon period—which lasts about twelve to eighteen months—they think they no longer need to do special things for each other, and each begins to feel taken for granted. This is when we hear people say they married the wrong person. So, it is not so much that they married the wrong person, but that each one just stopped being the right person. To make matters worse, they begin to irritate each other by doing the very things they know their spouse dislikes. If Christian couples would employ the golden rule of Matthew 7:12—"So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you"—they would watch their marriages flourish and grow exponentially. Being intentional about finding out each other's primary love language<sup>25</sup> may also help couples enhance their relationship

by being mindful of the way they communicate love to each other. So, in a good marriage, each partner will find out what their spouse likes and keep doing it, as well as find out what their spouse does not like and quit doing it.

## FORGIVE OFTEN

In marriage—the most intimate relationship—couples will experience hurt<sup>26</sup> from time to time. Thus, couples will need to learn to forgive each other. Sometimes one partner hurts the other unintentionally and with carelessness. There are also times when people wound each other by saying offensive and nasty things in retaliation for pain they may be experiencing. Some injuries can be easily ignored, while others are a little harder to forgive, and some leave deep and lasting scars. Forgiving someone who has harmed us is the hardest part of loving, and yet we cannot continue to truly love without it. It is not about becoming a doormat to be trampled upon, absolving others from responsibility, or simply forgetting. Still, forgiving actually helps to begin the process of healing from our hurts and moving on from the need to punish the other person. It also pushes us towards restoring the rift in the relationship. And, through God's power, we are able to give the gift of forgiveness to our mate. Romans 5:8 offers, "But God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Remember, the objective here is for the relationship to win, rather than for either one of the spouses to win. An important objective to remember here is that while you cannot control what your spouse will do, you can always control your response. So, choose a response that will build your relationship instead of tearing it down. A good marriage will have partners who are committed to resolving misunderstandings quickly and developing an attitude of forgiveness in their relationship.

## LAUGH A LOT

The old adage "Laughter is good medicine" still rings true today. In fact, medical research has found that laughter has physiological and neurological benefits. Laughter reduces stress, stimulates the immune system, reduces blood pressure, bonds couples together, and keeps the relationship fresh. We tell couples to find things to laugh about and stop stressing about the small stuff. Again, many issues couples have in marriage are simply idiosyncrasies. Nevertheless, they too can learn to laugh at unintended misunderstandings.<sup>27</sup> A good marriage will laugh a lot.

## TRUST GOD WITH YOUR MARRIAGE EVERY DAY

While we are humans and imperfect, we serve an extraordinary and perfect God who can do anything but fail. After all, if you both trust God, all things are possible, including the restoration of your relationship.

Since God promises to be with you always,<sup>28</sup> give you His peace,<sup>29</sup> and supply all your needs,<sup>30</sup> you can rest assured that if both spouses trust God with their marriage every day, they will have a successful marriage that is not only good, but very good.

## CONCLUSION

We often say that if most people knew what having a good marriage entailed, most would choose not to participate. However, if we could but understand that God, our Creator, so desperately longs to have a close and intimate relationship with us that He gave us marriage to help us better understand His love and grace, then perhaps our entire concept and understanding of marriage would be different. Marriage would be elevated to more than just a social status, and the Christian part of it would be more than a mere designation or title. Maybe Christian marriage is very good because ultimately it is less about our personal satisfaction and more about God's desire to save us in His kingdom!

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "And the Lord God said, 'It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him'" (Gen 1:18). All biblical quotations are from the NKJV, unless otherwise indicated.
- <sup>2</sup> "So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Gen 1:27).
- <sup>3</sup> "And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. Then the rib which the Lord God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man. And Adam said: 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.' Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed" (Gen 2:21–25).
- <sup>4</sup> "Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good. So the evening and the morning were the sixth day" (Gen 1:31).
- <sup>5</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing, 1952), 18.
- <sup>6</sup> "So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church" (Eph 5:28–29).
- <sup>7</sup> "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law" (Gal 5:22–23).
- <sup>8</sup> "And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it'" (Gen 1:28).
- <sup>9</sup> "You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up" (Deut 6:7).
- <sup>10</sup> White, 28, says, "The presence of Christ alone can make men and women happy. All the common waters of life can turn into the wine of heaven. The home then becomes as an Eden of bliss; the family a beautiful symbol of the family in heaven."
- <sup>11</sup> Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier and Better off Financially* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 15. Waite and Gallagher, 15, write, "Between rights and needs, between individualism and community, between fear and hope, between freedom and love. On the one hand, we cherish marriage as
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> "On the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abraham, saying: 'To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates'" (Gen 15:18).
- <sup>15</sup> "Likewise He also took the cup after supper saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you'" (Luke 22:20).

- <sup>16</sup> “Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge” (Heb 13:4).
- <sup>17</sup> “And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. Then the rib which the Lord God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man. And Adam said: “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (Gen 2:21–23).
- <sup>18</sup> Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 46–47, writes, “An eighth facet of a theology of sexuality, the divine paradigm for all future marriages as set forth in Gen 2:24 stresses the ingredient of intimacy. . . . The ‘one flesh’ relationship centers in the intimacy of sexual union, sexual intercourse. The physical act of coitus is the primary means of establishing the ‘innermost mystery’ of oneness, and in the covenant context of this verse seems to constitute the sign of the marriage covenant. Notice that according to the ‘therefore’ linking 2:24 with the preceding verses, the ‘one-flesh’ union designed for all marriages in the future was one which Adam and Eve personally experienced in the Garden of Eden before the fall, and thus sexual intercourse was clearly part of their unitive relationship already before fall as well as during their ongoing relationship outside the Garden (4:1).”
- <sup>19</sup> “Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the very heart of your house, your children like olive plants all around your table. Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord” (Ps 128:3–4).
- <sup>20</sup> “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it” (Prov 22:6).
- <sup>21</sup> “You shall not commit adultery” (Exod 20:14).
- <sup>22</sup> See Scott Stanley et al., *A Lasting Promise: A Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2014).
- <sup>23</sup> “But Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible’” (Mark 10:27).
- <sup>24</sup> See Willie and Elaine Oliver, *Hope for Today’s Families* (Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald, 2018).
- <sup>25</sup> See Gary Chapman, *The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love That Lasts* (Chicago, IL: Northfield, 2015).
- <sup>26</sup> We are not talking about physical pain and abuse. If you are experiencing any type of physical or emotional abuse in your relationship, please seek help from a qualified counselor or a pastor who has shown a high level of understanding—especially in places or countries where it is not easy to find a qualified counselor. Without help the abuse will most likely get worse. For more information, visit [www.family.adventist.org](http://www.family.adventist.org) and [www.enditnow.org](http://www.enditnow.org).
- <sup>27</sup> “A merry heart does good, like medicine, but a broken spirit dries the bones” (Prov 17:22).
- <sup>28</sup> “And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20).
- <sup>29</sup> “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (John 14:27).
- <sup>30</sup> “And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:19).

# CHILDREN OF DIVORCED COUPLES

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BY TELMA WITZIG, WILLIE OLIVER, AND ELAINE OLIVER

Despite God's clear intent from the beginning of time for a husband and wife to hold fast to each other and become one flesh (Gen 2:24), the plague of divorce has afflicted the human family throughout history. Without a doubt, God's plan was for the family—including a husband and wife and their children—to become a place where human relations could flourish, and where children could be nurtured as productive members of society and an integral part of the family of God.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, marriages in and out of the Christian church have continued to be challenged by the scourge of divorce. This reality has become an even greater burden to parents and children in the United States and around the world since no-fault divorce was adopted in California with the Family Law Act of 1969—signed into law by Governor Ronald Regan and becoming effective January 1, 1970.<sup>2</sup>

The primary goal of this study is to give hope to those who have been through divorce and particularly focus on the best ways to help and support children who have experienced the consequences of divorce. Although most of the research on divorce has been done in Western societies, our hope is that other cultures may also benefit from this understanding. Since peoples from cultures all over the world are influenced by the Western philosophy and lifestyle and are also dealing with the consequences of divorce, this should not be too difficult.

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While avoiding divorce is still the preferable option, we encourage those who have experienced divorce to get the help needed to make the best of their lives going forward. This is also a ministry opportunity for the church, as the body of Christ, to provide care and assistance to persons who have gone through a divorce—regardless of the reason. After all, dealing with the reality of divorce does not mean defending it. Rather, it is an admission that it exists, and even “good enough”<sup>3</sup> marriages too often end in divorce.

After a brief overview of the biblical perspective and some general observations on divorce, this study will address four aspects: the children—the main theme of this paper—the parents, suggestions for healing, and the role of the church in the process of divorce and healing.

## BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

In His discussion with the Pharisees, Jesus made very clear God’s expectation for marriage to be permanent. Matthew’s record offers:

The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, “Is it lawful for a man, to divorce his wife for just any reason?” And He answered and said to them, “Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let not man separate.” They said to Him, “Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?” He said to them, “Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.” (Matt 19:3–9)<sup>4</sup>

Unquestionably, the Bible makes clear the moral and legal features of divorce. Even if there is no direct mention of children in the text, there is a mandate for perpetuity, precisely because children would be involved and would need protection and security. It is certainly no accident that the next passage reports Jesus’ love and care for children (Matt 19:13–15).

Jesus’ declaration in Matthew 25:40, 45 undoubtedly includes children, ostensibly even the children of divorce: “I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me. . . . I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me” (Matt 25:40, 45). On another occasion “He took a little child and set him in the midst of them. And when He had taken him in His arms, He said to them, ‘Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me’” (Mark 9:36–37). In the following passage of Scripture Jesus says to His disciples, “A

new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another” (John 13:34).

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, admonishes, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2). James emphasizes, “Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world” (Jas 1:27). These admonitions could also apply to how we must relate to children of divorce and single parents who seemingly find themselves in a vulnerable space.

Old Testament texts also admonish the people of Israel not to forget the needy, making special mention of orphans: “You shall not afflict any widow or fatherless child. If you afflict them in any way, and they cry at all to Me, I will surely hear their cry; and My wrath will become hot” (Exod 22:22–24; see also Deut 14:28–29; 24:19–21; Zech 7:10). While punishment is threatened for those who oppress orphans, a special blessing is promised to those who care for them: “If you do not oppress the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, or walk after other gods to your hurt, then I will cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever” (Jer 7:6–7). In the Psalms God is described as the defender and protector of the fatherless (Pss 10:14; 68:5; 146:9). Thus, we should also support children of divorce who need to be protected and helped with their burdens, by visiting them and taking them into our homes if necessary—essentially being an active parent and defender of these vulnerable children.

## GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Mark Earley, an attorney, guest columnist for *The Christian Post*, and former politician, says, “This Christmas nearly one quarter of young adults between 18 and 35 will have to decide which parent to visit for the holidays—that is, if they are lucky enough to maintain a relationship with both of them. These are the children of the no-fault divorce generation, many of whom continue to be weighed down by the baggage of their parents’ separation.”<sup>5</sup>

Divorce occurs often, and when it does, the consequences are far-reaching—not only for the adults involved, but especially for the children. According to statistics on children of divorce, roughly every one in two children will see their parents’ marriage break up. Marija Lazic asserts that of these children, almost half will witness the end of their parents’ second marriage. Moreover, one in every ten children who have divorced parents will then see the break up of three or more parental marriages.<sup>6</sup>

Andrew Root, professor of youth and family ministry at Luther Seminary, explains that divorce causes children to question their core identity. Based on the social theory of Anthony Giddens, social life is meant to create ontological security. Giddens refers to ontological security as a sense of order and continuity in regard to an individual’s experiences.<sup>7</sup> As such, Root concludes that divorce is an issue that makes a child feel insecure, ontologically speaking.<sup>8</sup>

Root further suggests that aspects like responsibility, duty, and commitment, which were common reasons for staying in a marriage in former times, no longer exist. And while romantic love and self-fulfillment have become the core goals of modern unions today, the effects of divorce on

children can be so severe that it is often worth staying together even when these personal goals are no longer being met.<sup>9</sup>

Social scientific research reveals the need for both parents and family courts to consider all variables when couples first contemplate breaking up. Judith Wallerstein, former professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, and author of what is probably the most prominent and respected research on the impact of divorce on children, strongly emphasizes the need for reexamining the pros and cons of divorce before making such a decision. Wallerstein shows that unless there is physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, parents should stay together for the sake of their kids.<sup>10</sup>

Worthy of note, the New Testament identifies only sexual immorality by a spouse as grounds for seeking divorce. The Greek word *porneia* used by Jesus (Matt 5:32; 19:9) is a broad word that includes sexual sin such as adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, and incest. When one spouse disrupts the union and confidence of a marriage by sexual sin—and disowns his/her covenant obligation—the faithful partner is placed in an extremely difficult situation. After all means are exhausted to bring the sinning partner to repentance, the Bible permits release for the faithful partner through seeking divorce.

A marriage may also come to an end when an unbelieving mate no longer desires to live with his/her believing spouse and divorces her/him (1 Cor 7:12–15). However, “the two exceptions for divorce, *porneia* and divorce by an unbelieving spouse, are different. Only in the first case can the innocent spouse request a divorce. In the other case, the believing partner should not take the initiative to get a divorce.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet, couples continue to divorce for many reasons that have nothing to do with either of these causes, and that could actually be remedied if they took the time to get the right help.

## THE CHILDREN

In this part of the chapter, the short- and long-term effects of divorce on children will be discussed, as well as the needs of children.

### THE SHORT-TERM EFFECTS ON CHILDREN

Archibald Hart, a senior professor of psychology and dean emeritus at Fuller Theological Seminary, examines the effects of divorce on each person in the family—especially children. Hart suggests that resentment, worry, low self-esteem, anger, guilt, rejection, and fear of abandonment are some of the emotions children may feel when their parents get divorced. Hart’s goal is to show that surviving divorce is more than thinking correctly (e.g., “The divorce was not your fault”) or maintaining social solidarity. It is a deeply ontological reality that affects children’s very being. In other words, the child needs to have a stable state of mind contingent on a perception of cohesion related to happenings in his/her experience.<sup>12</sup>

As previously mentioned, Wallerstein’s research indicates that the disorder of the divorce process—with possible remarriages—scars children because it generates in them a hopeless desire



that their parents will stay together or reunite. Furthermore, children suffer from the loss of a closer relationship—not just with their fathers, who usually have fewer contact hours with their children after divorce, but also with their mothers, who are often strained from the psychological toll of the break-up and the need to become economically self-sufficient, not to mention the fact that they are often in pursuit of new romantic relationships. The result is that children are at risk of becoming insecure and unable to form lasting, fulfilling relationships. In addition, Wallerstein shows that the children of parents who stay married, despite their own personal dissatisfaction, seemed to be better socially and psychologically adjusted than those whose parents divorced. Her research claims that children do better on every measure of well-being if they grow up in a home with a married mother and father, when compared with their peers whose parents divorced.<sup>13</sup>

Jann Gumbiner, a licensed psychologist and clinical professor at the University of California, points out that divorce is bad for children because of self-blame, which, among several other factors, might negatively affect their grades. Also, the behavior of a depressed mother who is unable to leave her room, clean up the kitchen, or take her child to school may lead to rebellious, angry, and apathetic behavior from the child. In these cases, very often children whose parents have divorced are ashamed of inviting friends home from school, thus reducing the possibility of forming close friendships with their classmates.<sup>14</sup>

Another way children are adversely affected by the divorce of their parents is that invariably they take on the role of caregiver to the parent they live with, overly identifying with the pain of the ostensibly abandoned parent and being unable to break away emotionally. This is especially true for daughters in relationship to their mothers. As they become adults, these daughters are frequently incapable of establishing separate lives of their own, even if they live hundreds of miles away.<sup>15</sup>

In her article about severe stress and mental disturbance in children, Cynthia R. Pfeffer, a professor of psychiatry, offers that family transitions can be stressors on children and adolescents, mainly because they have to adapt to shifting parenting styles and house environments. These children often live with their mothers during the week and with their fathers during the weekend, or vice versa, making it difficult to experience continuity and the security it provides.<sup>16</sup>

In order to better assist these teenagers, it is important to be aware of the typical process of mourning that almost every child of divorce goes through. The steps are denial, anger, negotiation, depression, and finally acceptance.

Children mourn differently from adults. Like everything else, they do it very intensely. The grief phases in children are often not linear. Invariably, they skip or repeat phases, or their mood may fluctuate in what can be called “mourning puddles.” Some adults misunderstand what is taking place and may believe children have already completed their grief, but it is not always the case. In some situations, children can only judge and mourn later. For example, if the father of a five-year-old boy leaves the family, the child may be sad. In this case, however, grief can come back at puberty once this boy becomes aware that he lacks a father figure in his life. Hence, it is very important to take a child’s grief seriously. Even if the other parent lives nearby, this may be the first time they experience someone being gone. That might unsettle and scare them, but at the same time

they learn and grow through the grieving process. The best way to support children in these kinds of situations is to signal understanding and enable them to speak—in their language—about their feelings. Saying something like “You are sad that Mommy does not live with us anymore” might help convey to a child that you are listening to his/her grief and expressing empathy for his/her loss.

In the first grieving phase there is denial, which is when the separation is not accepted or noticed. Then comes anger at the parent who stayed—for not being able to keep the parent who left, or for sending that parent away—and also anger for being left behind by the parent who left the home.

During the third phase children begin to negotiate, which is usually a shorter period. It may be negotiating with either parent by promising to be a better son or daughter, in order for the parent who left to come back and make the family whole again. A child might say to himself or to herself, “If I clean up my room, or if I get better grades in school, then my parents will surely reconcile.”

The depressive phase is the fourth one and the active grief phase. Children weep and say goodbye to the familiar configuration of the intact family. Then to conclude, there is the acceptance stage, in which the child slowly learns to live with both parents in separate houses.<sup>17</sup>

### **THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS ON CHILDREN**

There is another significant aspect of divorce and its consequences on children, which involves adult children of divorce and the possible failure of their own marriages. Studies on this age group may sometimes appear to have slightly different results.

Starting with Wallerstein, among the most important discoveries of her research is the long-term effects of divorce on children. She found that successful relationships and personal satisfaction were impaired in adult children of divorce due to their parents’ divorce experience, which essentially also became theirs.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, many parents believe that their divorce may somehow doom their children to have failed marriages of their own one day. Studies of this age group appear to suggest that adult children of divorce might become cautious about trusting others since they now know from experience that people close to them may leave, which may affect their future relationships.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, Wallerstein’s research also found that as children of divorce become adults and face their own relationships and marriage, the experience of their parents’ divorce turns out to be a difficult obstacle to successful ties and personal satisfaction. One participant in the study stated, “I fear that any family I get involved in will dissolve.” Wallerstein’s findings indicate that fewer children of divorce get married, they divorce at higher rates, and daughters of divorce are more likely to become single mothers.<sup>20</sup>

Antagonistic parent relationships, derogatory statements, and rejection of the other parent contribute in the long run to negative consequences. Children suffer when parents argue, and they feel guilty for negative feelings between their parents. A lack of civility and coordination between parents may also lead to loyalty conflicts among the children.<sup>21</sup>

In a quantitative review of literature, sociologist Paul R. Amato examined the possible effects on children several years after a divorce. The studies compared children of married parents with those who experienced divorce at different ages. The investigators followed these children into later childhood and adolescence, assessing their academic achievement as well as their emotions and behavior, such as delinquency, self-concept, and social relationships. On average, the studies found only very small differences on all these measures between children of divorced parents and those from intact families, suggesting that the variance between these two groups may not always be as statistically significant as we may think.<sup>22</sup>

It is worthy of note, however, that while many studies demonstrate that divorce is devastating to everyone involved, especially to children, other studies indicate that divorce must be viewed as a process of transitions and perspectives for the entire family. E. Mavis Hetherington discovered that familial interactions will affect the outcomes of divorce and remarriage and variations of outcomes must be acknowledged. If one does not believe that there is hope for children of divorce, then one fails to take into account God's ability to heal and to help individuals overcome their past. Another perspective of hope is that in many cases young adults who experienced their parents' divorce often develop strengths and resiliencies that others without that familiarity do not have. There are also indications that in certain instances the current generation of young adults, having suffered through their parents' divorce, may work to find ways to avoid a similar fate.<sup>23</sup>

Grant Mohi, a sociologist, also offers research findings similar to that of Wallerstein's, asserting that when children experience the divorce of their parents, it may cause them to be more cautious and unsure of their ability to form healthy relationships. Yet, there might be exceptions in which children of divorce may behave much like their peers from intact families.<sup>24</sup>

One of the findings in Mohi's research suggests that children's age at the time of parental divorce does not always determine the level of difficulty they will have with maintaining relationships. Another finding suggests that parental divorce is not always a significant predictor of how positive or negative the respondents' romantic relationships will turn out, given that both children of divorce and children from intact families in his study sample reported fairly similar outcomes in the frequency and duration of their relationships as well as similar attitudes towards marriage.<sup>25</sup>

It is worthy of note, nonetheless, that while the majority of participants in Mohi's study sample reported conflict between their parents, those who reported a post-divorce relationship with their parents that was more amicable—or, at the very least, lacked conflict—were among those who reported enjoying longer-lasting relationships. To be sure, the type of relationship these respondents had with their biological fathers was not as affected as participants whose parents had a conflicted post-divorce relationship. In other words, close father-child relationships resulted in fewer adolescent behavioral problems.<sup>26</sup>

## THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN

As children think and feel according to their level of development, it is not easy to know exactly how much they understand about love, marriage, separation, and divorce. The younger

children are, the more their ideas and feelings differ clearly from those of adults. Only in adolescence do they start thinking and feeling more similarly to their parents. That is why older children react differently to the separation of their parents than younger children, which depends largely on the development of their bonding behavior. Since bonding is built on the time the toddler and the caregiver spend together, the quality of care determines the well-being of the child. The capacity for bonding is high in the early years of life and diminishes after that, so that during puberty, children's bonds gradually dissolve to the point that, as young adults, they leave their parents in order to lead their own lives.<sup>27</sup>

Some researchers suggest that in the early years of life children rarely suffer from divorce, contingent on their mother's extensive care. And that while fathers are also important, and actually become indispensable to children when they seek a deeper relationship, in the early years of life babies suffer less than older children when their fathers leave. On the other hand, separation is especially stressful for school-age children because they are more settled in their relationships and perceive an absent caregiver as a loss.<sup>28</sup> While this assertion may appear positive on the surface, the reality is that when couples divorce, women tend to have less time for their children since they are more likely to have to work to provide for their children, in addition to taking time away from their children to pursue new romantic relationships.<sup>29</sup> Of course, this means that it is very unlikely for divorced mothers to give adequate time to their children after divorce because of these reasons, adversely impacting the lives of children at every age.

What is obvious from the research, though, is that when parents are not well, they have more difficulty perceiving their children's need for protection and care, unintentionally leaving them feeling neglected or rejected. These feelings of carelessness can make children feel guilty or lead them to desperate attempts to please their parents. Children may react with moodiness, withdrawal, aggression, decreased performance, or psychosomatic complaints like stomach pain and sleeping disorders.

Between the ages of four and six, children are more likely to suffer from stress, due to their increasing focus on same-sex models. Thus, at this stage of his life a boy will be more likely to miss an absent father as a role model. At the same time, a father who is invariably absent is not likely to be much better than a divorced father. The same may be true for dysfunctional families. Children of intact families and children of divorced families are both in need of a child-friendly environment. While this may include many things, on a primary level, children should have an adult caregiver with them at all times. While this may be more difficult for single parents, it is still a necessary reality.<sup>30</sup>

For children, happiness presents itself in different ways, depending on the age and individual disposition of the child. In general, they have fundamental needs such as unconditional love from their family, self-confidence and high self-esteem, the opportunity to play with other children, encouraging teachers and supportive caretakers, safe and secure surroundings, and appropriate guidance and discipline.

In the midst of the chaos produced by divorce, we go back to the message found in Malachi 2:14–16, where God shares with Israel His disappointment about the way husbands dealt with their wives:

Because the Lord has been witnessing between you and the wife of your youth, with whom you have dealt treacherously; yet she is your companion and your wife by covenant. But did He not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore, take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth. “For the Lord God of Israel says that He hates divorce, for it covers one’s garment with violence,” says the Lord of hosts. “Therefore, take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously.”

Here, God clearly spells out His displeasure with the men of Israel who had dealt deceitfully and disloyally with their wives, whom God had made them one with—denoting the permanence of the union— for the purpose of godly offspring. No doubt, God knew that by dissolving their marriage, which was meant to be a lifelong agreement (covenant), their children would be greatly impacted—to the point of possibly losing their connection with God. Regardless of the euphemisms we may want to use to refer to divorce, God comes out and clearly states that He hates divorce.

While it is clear that God hating divorce does not mean He hates those who are divorced, He outlines several reasons He intended marriage to be for life. One of these has to do with the fact that God wants children to have a place of safety, security, and unconditional love. While divorce does not always lead to children walking away from God, it certainly makes their journey more difficult in most cases.<sup>31</sup>

In the time of Malachi, a wife could hardly divorce her husband. So God addressed the males. In the New Testament it becomes clear that already in the Greco-Roman culture, women were able to initiate a divorce and follow through with it, as it is today (Mark 10:11–12). Joyce G. Baldwin states,

Only when both parents remain faithful to their marriage vows can the children be given the security which provides the basis for godly living. The family was intended to be the school in which God’s way of life was practiced and learned (Exod. 20:12; Deut. 11:19). Because a divine institution was being threatened Malachi urged that none be faithless to the wife of his youth.<sup>32</sup>

## THE PARENTS

Since the well-being of little children depends almost totally on the welfare of their parents, this section of the study explores the effects of divorce on parents, as well as their needs. The objective is to provide a less distressed environment for children by sharing some guidelines to benefit parents in reducing conflict when divorce cannot be avoided.

### THE EFFECTS ON THE PARENTS

There are psychological symptoms when a parent’s well-being is affected, such as chronic bad mood, depression, physical exhaustion, and psychosomatic symptoms like headaches, insomnia,

and eating disorders. Since separation touches the essence of a person's being, the severity of the conflict depends on four aspects:

***The willingness of parents to engage in conflict resolution***

Joshua E. Stern, a family law advocate, suggests a few strategies for conflict resolution in a divorce situation. First, the person who is angry should separate themselves from the situation to take time to cool down. Second, attacking the problem rather than the person is also beneficial. Additionally, focusing on the issue, rather than on the position of the issue, is extremely helpful in resolving conflict. It is crucial to accept and respect the reality that individual opinions may differ and work to develop common agreement.

***The emotional stability of parents***

Parents have the capacity to maintain emotional balance under stressful circumstances. If they choose to be calm and even-tempered, they will be less likely to feel tense or rattled. Parents who are unbalanced tend to behave impulsively, have anger issues, or react explosively to situations. In such cases, parents should seek professional help for themselves and their parenting skills.

***The current life status of parents, encompassing their social, occupational, and financial situation***

Empirical evidence indicates that socioeconomic status affects family stability, including parenting practices and developmental outcomes for children. The truth is, social class influences overall human functioning, including physical and mental health.<sup>33</sup>

It is well documented that women often need the help of public assistance programs to supplement their family finances when they experience divorce.<sup>34</sup> To be sure, a parent who previously stayed at home or worked only part-time may need to work full-time after divorce. Parents and caregivers should be supported in combating environmental stressors by offering them programs that teach positive parenting skills. In some countries, the government provides help by visiting the homes of single parents once a week to assist them with the challenges children might present.

***The familiar social and cultural environments and how they view divorce***

When a divorcée continues to receive support from her ex-husband and is able to remain in the family home, the experience of divorce is less traumatic for her and the children involved, increasing the probability of fewer negative consequences.<sup>35</sup>

For the benefit of the parents as well as for the children, certain practices—common in highly controversial separations—should be avoided, such as ongoing legal disputes over the custody of or access to children and hostility in communication between parents, which may include humiliation and defamation. Ceaseless arguments about child rearing—including accusations about the behavior and parenting practices of the former partner—are among the

practices observed in contentious divorces. In such circumstances, the behavior of parents is likely to result in psychological and physical neglect of the child and psychological damage to themselves.

Moreover, parents should never denigrate the home of the other parent in front of their children and should practice entering the apartment of the other parent to pick up their children when it is their turn to have access to the children. It is the duty of separated parents—as far as possible—to be agreeable with each other in front of their offspring, even if they have different opinions on how to raise them. For this to happen, it is essential for parents to communicate regularly and support each other in the interest of their children's well-being. The reality is that the separation of the parents is less likely to be traumatic for themselves and the children if the vital needs of the children are being satisfied.

When children are psychologically or physically neglected, separated parents might feel even more like failures and experience a sense of guilt, which inevitably is often the case. As a rule, during and after separation, several organizational, financial, and social burdens are added to the lives of divorced parents. Parents need to find peace with God, themselves, and each other again—even if separated—and learn to trust in the Lord.

### **THE NEEDS OF PARENTS**

Over the past 150 years, the role and structure of families have changed. Extended families and communities with numerous caregivers and children have shrunk to small households with often only one parent and one or two children. Generally, women today have children much later than they did before. Also, parents are often distressed by the double burden of caring for a family and having to work outside the home to provide for them.

The well-being, self-esteem, and performance of parents are jeopardized when physical, emotional, and material security are absent. This often happens when social acceptance diminishes and social isolation increases.

Since this theme has been addressed in another chapter of this book, only an overview of the needs of parents will be dealt with here. In this vein, Susan Pease Gadoua, a licensed therapist with expertise in marriage and divorce, the author of *Contemplating Divorce*, and the co-author of *The New I Do*, proposes three ways to get through divorce more quickly and with greater satisfaction:

First, is making new friends. In lives that are fast-paced and technologically saturated, it is easy to forget how important human interaction can be. Making new friends means seeking out people who can be considered friends—essentially, people to talk to and perhaps do things with. A second facet to be taken into consideration is to explore new things—for example, getting involved in activities that were not done before, because their spouse was not interested in doing so. Going places one has never been and doing things one has never done is enlivening.

Of course, a good way to travel as a single person is to consider the option of group travel packages.

Third, the way to get through a divorce more effectively is by learning from others who have been through a divorce, especially since some might have gleaned a great deal of wisdom to share. To

be sure, calling on others to ask for help is one of the greatest challenges any adult faces. Yet, those being approached are often only too happy to share what happened to them, what resources they used, and what they learned from the process—all of which may be helpful to a person currently going through that experience.

A divorce recovery group can be very helpful, as someone else in the group may be likely to have the answer to a question one has, or know exactly who to refer one to for help. Individuals do not have to go through divorce alone.<sup>36</sup>

## SUGGESTIONS FOR HEALING

In this section, some suggestions for healing are given—mainly for children, but also for parents going through a divorce.

### MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE CHILDREN

#### *Allowing children to share their frustrations and troubles*

Parents need to give their children permission to share their disappointment, confusion, and pain about the divorce, even if it might be hurtful to the parents. For that reason, it is essential that parents find the strength to listen to their children even when it does not feel good. Of course, it is easy for a parent to feel threatened by their child's anger, fear, or sadness. Nevertheless, resisting the temptation to defend themselves when confronted is vital for both the parent's and the child's well-being.

#### *The role of routines and the celebration of life*

Parents should also be aware that meaningful routines and rituals might have faded away with the marriage and it is important, when possible, not to force new routines or rituals on the child, even if it is liberating to the adult. A good way parents may help teenagers feel secure is to not hide suffering from them and to find ways to celebrate life with their teenager.

#### *In the case of remarriage*

Some parents may wish to enter a new romantic relationship, while others may not. In some cases, remarriage is not biblically possible. In the next paragraphs we assume that there is no biblical hindrance for remarriage. Still, the question is how best to help the children of divorce with such a situation. In order to avoid increasing their child's stress after a divorce, parents should delay entering a new relationship that may potentially lead to marriage. Young children should be prepared before their parent(s) consider remarriage. Otherwise, they will feel excluded and suspicious, which may have an unfavorable consequence on the new relationship. While there should be a relationship of trust between the new partner and the offspring, stepparents should be very careful when dealing with parenting issues. They should be cautious not to overstep their partner's parenting style.<sup>37</sup>



It is very important for divorced parents to be mindful of the reality that while romantic partnerships may change parenthood is a constant. So, regardless of which way a partnership may develop, parenthood is a common, binding commitment that should continue to be a priority.

Children should not be used by their single parent to bond with their new partner. Such efforts almost invariably have negative effects on the relationship. An awkwardness could come out of such an artificial arrangement, which might affect the communication between the child and the new companion.

### ***New sibling relations***

Another major aspect in a patchwork family is the relationship among siblings, half siblings, and stepsiblings. Sibling relationships are some of the most important and long-lasting ones. Therefore, when possible, these connections should be particularly well maintained in childhood. Siblings' and also stepsiblings' relationships are emotionally powerful and critically important not only in puberty, but over the course of a lifetime. It is in this relationship that children form one of their first peer groups and where they learn social skills, particularly in managing conflict. Hence, patchwork families can also be a place in which children learn negotiating. Bargaining might be a means to reduce negative consequences of separation among children of divorce.

Encouraging children to grow together in a blended family is an important feature of this arrangement. One of the secrets for half siblings and stepsiblings to get along with each other is the intentional approach in which parents relate to their stepchildren. This may be done by concentrating on things they have in common, seeking to treat all the children as equitably as possible, and helping children to feel at home, especially if they only visit for the weekend. It is always beneficial when parents have a good relationship with their new partner, which serves as a model to the children and inspires them in their relationships with each other.

According to Karen L. Maudlin, an experienced licensed psychologist, some adult children of divorce (ACODs), wonder if their marriages are as ill-fated as their parents'. Although the answer is no, it is necessary to acknowledge some significant challenges, such as not having the opportunity to learn commitment and problem-solving strategies.

In many ways, it is tougher for ACODs to succeed at marriage. Therefore, the author mentions three common fears to this age group, which is essential for them to confront: the fear of failure, the fear of betrayal, and the fear of abandonment. By taking a few practical steps, ACODs may prevent these fears from damaging their own marriage.

### ***Overcoming fear***

With regard to overcoming fear of failure, it is vital to trust God's plan for young adults who, as children, were engraved with the prediction of failure. ACODs need to grasp the healing power of the promise from God written in Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'"

For that to happen, it might be useful to write down any thoughts that could keep the married ACOD from believing that God wants to rid them of fear and ask God to banish those thoughts.<sup>38</sup>

As for conquering the fear of betrayal, Maudlin points out that ACODs could review the traits that attracted them to their spouses in order to confirm that they are a good choice for lifelong loyalty. Another way to beat this fear is for the new couple to reaffirm their commitment to each other on a regular basis and trust God to guide them in this promise.

Finally, listing the attributes that drew them to their mates, focusing on their mates' strengths, might help decrease the fear of abandonment in ACODs. Also remember God's constant love as stated in Joshua 1:5: "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you."

The better ACODs cope with these fears, the fewer negative effects will be evident in the relationship formation and care of their own children.

### ***Feeling accepted***

Since the basis of good upbringing is good relationships, children are more likely to obey the adults they trust and feel accepted by. Hence, rules have little or no value when there is no viable relationship. When children have a good relationship with their parents, they tend to handle different upbringing styles with less difficulty.<sup>39</sup>

Since children of divorce need more attention and care, relatives and friends should be intentional about supporting their parents. For instance, helping pack moving boxes or assisting with pick-ups and playdates are good ideas for minimizing the hurt of having to move. It is crucial for children to develop a way of living together that guarantees the best social, temporal, and local stability.

### ***Tips for successful co-parenting***

Co-parenting should be tailored to the individual needs of children, so that they are in a position to adapt to different life conditions. In order for that to take place, Deborah Serani offers the following tips to parents: 1) engage in open dialogue with your ex-spouse, 2) ensure rules are consistent and agreed upon at both households, 3) commit to speaking positively around the house, 4) agree on boundaries and behavioral guidelines for raising the children, 5) update often, and 6) speak positively about your ex-spouse so the children will learn that despite differences their parents still have regard and respect for one another.<sup>40</sup>

### ***The role of relatives and friends***

A way friends or relatives can be helpful to children of divorce is to find ways to tell them the story of the children's parents. They may share stories about the children's parents' courtship, marriage, and the birth of the child, if they are familiar with it. Talking about the past is essential for the ontological security of children. Hearing these stories may be painful and weird, but it does remind them that they are real. It is important for friends and relatives to convey to the child that they are not on the side of the child nor on the side of either parent. These individuals should make

a commitment to being with the child on a regular basis without having an ulterior motive other than just being available for support.

A relative can validate a teenager's feelings by sharing his/her own experience of dealing with regret, fear, or pain—even if the occasion was very different from that of a divorce. Friends can also help children of divorce to heal by building routines with them. Grandparents, aunts, and relatives in general could also share with the child of divorce rituals that already exist in the extended family.<sup>41</sup> Kinsfolk may also give the young person sentimental gifts or tokens that express their appreciation of the child.

### **MEETING THE NEEDS OF PARENTS**

Parents who are going through a separation need support themselves from friends and acquaintances—not only during but also after the process. It is worthy of note that the well-being of parents is a basic requirement for the well-being of the children.

## **THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN THE PROCESS OF DIVORCE AND HEALING**

It is important to review the role of the church in rehabilitating children during and after the process of divorce. However, it is also crucial for the church to support and help equip families before there is a divorce, given that intact families provide the best place for children to grow and develop into contributing members of society.<sup>42</sup>

Drawing on experience, the social sciences, and theology, Andrew Root suggests that there are four basic areas in which the church may help children going through divorce. Root discusses these practices in terms of three different kinds of people: the youth worker, a parent, and a friend. He proposes that children of divorce need the community of the church to strengthen their shaken attitude.

Below, the specific needs are outlined:

### **MIRRORING AS SEEING AND BEING SEEN**

According to Root, the congregation can offer “sanctuary.” The local church can become a safe place for young people to simply come and be. The half hour spent in fellowship before youth group begins, monthly potluck dinners, conversations in the parking lot, the familiar events, and rhythm of the community's life together all become sacred as young people are given “sanctuary” in a social environment that acknowledges their situation with empathy and provides a stable place to rest from the chaos and upheaval caused by parental divorce.

The church must accept an increased responsibility in influencing the child for Christ because of the breakdown of social structures. According to surveys of the North American Adventist membership, it is estimated that in one out of every five Adventist homes, one of the spouses is not an Adventist. This means that in those families only one parent—or even none—may provide

the encouragement and incentive needed to lead children to Christ. Even in two-parent Adventist homes, both parents often work away from home, spending little time with their children. This reality reduces the effectiveness of the home influence and adds to the responsibilities of the church. Therefore, a part of the challenge of the church is to nurture these children and youth—for instance, through Adventurer Club or Pathfinder Club. The Adventurer Club, a ministry network of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, has the capacity to assist parents in making the development of their children, ages four to nine, richer and more meaningful.<sup>43</sup> But probably the most well-known ministry is that of the Pathfinder Club, for boys and girls grades five to ten. One of its basic purposes is to fulfill the Elijah message of Malachi, in which the “hearts of the parents are turned toward their children and the hearts of the children are turned to their parents” (Mal 4:6). As parents and church members work, worship, and play together, the so-called generation gap is more likely to disappear in a bond of common experience.<sup>44</sup> In addition, other ministries and initiatives such as youth groups, collegiate gatherings, outreach activities, and mission trips have the potential to meet important needs of children inasmuch as they offer action, adventure, challenge, and activities.

If the pastor, a children’s minister, an elder, a deacon, or any church member offers a simple word of empathy and encouragement—for instance, showing that he/she notices how difficult the situation is for a child or children—such an exchange can go a long way toward helping children feel supported. A simple act of kindness conveys to children of divorce that they are not alone. Also, the local church youth leader may have the capacity to find ways to refocus the programming of children and youth from separate age-specific cohorts to meaningful interactions between adults and kids. And this should not stop with the youth, but rather continue with collegiate and young adults who may also be victims of their parents’ divorce. It may also help a lot to ask young people and children of divorce for some help with church programs, worship service, and ministries. They may feel honored to be asked and may greatly appreciate responsibilities given to them. It shows them how much they are valued and respected and tells them that in spite of all their distress they still can help others and thereby learn to overcome their own pain.

### **THE ABILITY TO BALANCE AUTONOMY AND BELONGING BY SPEAKING AND LISTENING**

The congregation can convene spaces for intergenerational conversations to occur, including places where personal narratives may be shared. It is crucial that facilitators become familiar with the stories of brokenness about the children and youth they work for. Adult members should also be aware of the importance of not only seeing and hearing young people, but also being seen and heard by them. After all, regardless of marital or family status, every member of the church has experienced some degree of brokenness, since “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). As such, it is our duty, as Jesus says, to “love one another; as I have loved you” (John 13:24).

## HAVING ROUTINE AS MUTUAL ASSISTANCE

An essential component needed by individuals to experience ontological security is some kind of dependable routine to help organize their lives. This is why it is indispensable for the children's minister or youth/collegiate leader to be keenly aware that weekly church programs have power—not because of their entertainment value, but rather for their ability to become routines and rituals that provide a sense of continuity for young people to build their lives around and find ontological security.<sup>45</sup>

## BRACKETING OUT ANXIETY BY ACTING IN GLADNESS

Blessings are passed on to another out of joy and anticipation. In being a blessing, the church manifests her gladness that the young person finds a place of belonging there. Moreover, it becomes the blueprint of a new story. The youth worker gives the child space to share his/her gifts with the community and within worship. Ways of doing so include displaying the child's paintings in the church building, offering opportunities to participate in worship by performing musical pieces, and allowing them preach a mini sermon on a youth Sabbath, if possible.

The church, as an institution, should be prepared to deal with the changes family configurations bring with it, including the reality of divorce. To embrace and accept not only the adult but also the child is most important for the survival of families, the church itself, and society in general.

When the church welcomes individuals (and their families) who are divorced or are going through a divorce, this does not mean the church is pro-divorce. Rather, it means that the church is pro-people and following Jesus' imperative in John 13:35, which says, "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." The truth is, the church must be clear about sharing two messages in Scripture: The first message is God's ideal for permanence in marriage (Mark 10:7–9), and the second message is the reality of human brokenness and God's grace (John 6:37). These two messages are not contradictory. In fact, embracing and proclaiming these two messages will help the church to be at once the voice of God and the heart of God. While it is true that God hates divorce (Mal 2:16), which gives the church the responsibility to help strengthen marriages to be able to go the distance, and sometimes even deal with disciplining members who may have no biblical grounds for divorce, it is also true that Jesus declares, "He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted" (Luke 4:18), which compels the church to follow Jesus' example of helping those who are broken, even when it means confronting the reality of sin.

Without a doubt, providing a meaningful ministry for children and single adults tailored to their needs, including those who are single because of divorce, would tremendously help them regain their sense of belonging and would definitely accelerate their healing process.<sup>46</sup> But although church programs can be very helpful for children of divorced parents, individual church members reaching out to them, befriending them, inviting them to their homes and their activities—for example, game nights—and their ministries to the local congregation, the wider church, and to guests may make all the difference and can be a God-given blessing to them.

## CONCLUSION

The goal of this study was mainly to help parents, children/youth, pastors, youth leaders, and church members deal effectively with children whose parents have divorced. The objective was not to write a theological treatise, but rather to give practical advice on the subject by explaining the process of divorce from a child's perspective and how the crisis may be managed with a degree of success.

Children from separated families have special needs and feelings right after the divorce and for many years after. Because it is true that many of them feel responsible for the divorce of their parents, it is important to make them understand that they are not to blame, and help them mitigate the potential negative impact their parents' separation could have on their lives. Moreover, the reality of divorce compels children to be faced with having to adapt to completely new or changed relationships with new step-parent, half-sisters or brothers, and biological family members.

Children of divorce may face many changes, challenges, and premature family responsibilities. Because of this experience, communities of faith must come to grips with how to best help children, youth, and young adults navigate questions about the image of God as a father, learning to trust, suffering and pain, internal harm, as well as sexuality and marriage. And more than anything else, the church must be prepared to assist the children of divorce deal with the brokenness experienced because of the trauma of their parents' separation in ways that will help them cope and heal, so they are able to lead productive lives.

The truth is, there is an increasing number of people in the church who are divorced and who are themselves, in many instances, children of divorce. Because of this reality, the church must focus on providing empathy, guidance, and assistance for those who are wounded and often broken by divorce or the divorce of their parents. This places a great responsibility on the church to be proactive. Of course, being proactive means implementing "divorce care" programs for children and parents. It also means having in place pre-engagement and premarital counseling programs to equip couples considering marriage develop skills to help mitigate the results of marital conflicts that will inevitably arise. Such programs, personal interactions, and friendships with peers and older brothers and sisters will help to save many from the burdens and traumas caused by divorce, creating in the process stronger and healthier families, which in turn will give rise to stronger and healthier churches that can share the gospel with power and joy until the Lord comes.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, "Love to God and Man," *Review and Herald*, November 17, 1896, offers, "God would have our families' symbols of the family in heaven. Let parents and children bear this in mind every day, relating themselves to one another as members of the family of God. Then their lives will be of such a character as to the world an object lesson of what families who love God and keep His commandments may be. Christ will be glorified; His peace and grace and love will pervade the family circle like a precious perfume."
- <sup>2</sup> Donna S. Hershkowitz and Drew R. Liebert, "The Direction of Divorce Reform in California: From Fault to No-Fault . . . and Back Again?" (paper prepared for a hearing by the Assembly Judiciary Committee of the State of California, Nov. 6, 1997), <https://ajud.assembly.ca.gov/sites/ajud.assembly.ca.gov/files/reports/1197%20divorcereform97.pdf> (accessed May 8, 2022), 1.

- <sup>3</sup> See Paul R. Amato, “Good Enough Marriages: Parental Discord, Divorce, and Children’s Long-Term Well-Being,” *Virginia Journal of Social Policy & the Law* 71 (2001–2002): 1.
- <sup>4</sup> All biblical quotations are from the New King James Version, unless otherwise indicated.
- <sup>5</sup> Mark Earley, “Hope for Grown Children of Divorce,” *The Christian Post*, December 12, 2008, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/hope-for-grown-children-of-divorce.html> (accessed May 8, 2022).
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- <sup>9</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> Judith Wallerstein, Julia M. Lewis, and Sandra Blakeslee, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study* (New York, NY: Hyperion, 2000).
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- <sup>12</sup> Archibald D. Hart, *Helping Children Survive Divorce: What to Expect; How to Help* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1997), 38–39, 80, 92.
- <sup>13</sup> Wallerstein, Lewis, and Blakeslee, 422.
- <sup>14</sup> Jann Gumbiner, “Divorce Hurts Children, Even Grown Ones,” *Psychology Today*, October 31, 2011, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-teenage-mind/201110/divorce-hurts-children-even-grown-ones> (accessed December 31, 2021).
- <sup>15</sup> Wallerstein, Lewis, and Blakeslee, 283.
- <sup>16</sup> Cynthia R. Pfeffer, ed., *Severe Stress and Mental Disturbance in Children* (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 1996), 559–590.
- <sup>17</sup> Doreen Oelmann, *Das Fünf-Phasen-Modell zum Sterbeprozess nach Kübler-Ross*, adapted by T. Witzig (Norderstedt: GRIN Verlag, 2008), 7–9.
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- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 411.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 422.
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- <sup>27</sup> Remo H. Largo and Monika Czernin, *Glückliche Scheidungskinder* (München Zürich: Piper, 2015), 100.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*
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- <sup>30</sup> Largo and Czernin, 100.
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<sup>35</sup> Joshua E. Stern, “Strategies for Conflict Resolution in Divorce and Family Law,” Stern Perkoski Mendez, January 14, 2013, <http://jesfamilylaw.com/blog/strategies-for-conflict-resolution> (accessed December 31, 2021).

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<sup>38</sup> Karen L. Maudlin, “Children of Divorce,” *Today’s Christian Woman*, September 2008, <https://www.todaychristianwoman.com/articles/2008/september/children-of-divorce.html> (accessed May 8, 2022).

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# DEALING WITH LOSS: LEARNING TO GRIEVE WHEN DEATH SHATTERS YOUR LIFE

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BY FRANK M. HASEL

Note from author: In this article, I share my story of dealing with the death of my wife and, much of what I share is taken from my book, *Love Is! A Journey of Grief, Grace, and Gratitude* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2024).

We all love stories of happy marriages. They are a glimpses of heaven right here on earth. To experience the unconditional acceptance in such a secure relationship produces happiness and helps us develop our God given potential. A harmonious and love filled marriage is what we all long for, it seems. The selfless support of love, the experience of undeserved kindness and the protection and stability of a faithful companion you can trust for life is what an ideal human relationship looks like, or so we are told.

I had the joy and privilege of experiencing such a marriage. It was carried by mutual trust and love. Although my marriage was not perfect – no marriage is flawless this side of heaven – it was a delightful relationship. Life does not have to be 100% perfect to be beautiful. And our love

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for each other was beautiful. But what do you do when this beautiful life falls apart? (Hasel, 2024).

For many years I was never confronted with severe suffering or death. I experienced a carefree childhood. I enjoyed the comfort and love of family and friends who enabled me to live successfully. I enjoyed our happy marriage, we had three beautiful and gifted sons, I worked as a pastor and was able to get a Ph.D. in theological studies. I had a satisfying academic career and was the dean of a theological seminary. Life was good. I was content. All this changed when I was confronted with a significant loss in 2009. The death of my wife swirled my life around like a tornado. It completely changed my existence. Death often occurs unexpectedly, and frequently much too early. Ulrike (the English phonetic spelling is *ool-ree-keh*) was only forty-three years old when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. It was cancer of the most aggressive form. She did not choose to have cancer. In fact, none of us wanted it. Ulrike had a bright future ahead of her. She was still very much needed. We all loved her immensely. But less than a year after she was diagnosed with breast cancer she died. Those who knew her can testify that she was an amazingly positive and cheerful person. She was an inspiring example of genuine kindness and self-sacrificing love. Ulrike had a living relationship with Jesus and showed unwavering trust in God. When she died, she was at peace with herself, the people she knew, and God. For her, death was a release from all her suffering. For our three children and me it was – and still is – a very cruel loss.

Mascha Kaléko, one of my favorite poets, lamented the death of her son in the following poem.

The fear of my own death is not that strong,  
it's just the deaths of those who I adore.  
How shall I live when they are here no more? ...  
He knows it well who can identify; –  
And those enduring it may please forgive.  
Just think: one's own death one just has to die,  
but with the death of others one must live (Nolte, 2017, p. 101).

Yes, I could face my own death. I was not afraid to die. But living with the death of Ulrike, whose pleasant voice filled my former days and made me feel at home, whom I trusted most and who was closest to my heart, is a different story altogether and it seems to be a life-long learning process for me. Finding new ways to live with the absence of the very person that meant so much to me is a steep and tough learning experience. Confronting the reality of death and facing the harsh reality of living without her is brutally painful. Suddenly the very things that I had taken for granted, life itself, was no longer secure.

Finding new ways of arranging my life as a widower without the person I loved so completely is easier said than done. Losing the one you love so deeply is a tough road to walk. It is the stuff of nightmares. I used to think that the story of losing my wife was a liability. It is often awkward meeting people who do not know what to say when they hear what happened. People feel sorry

for me, even after years have passed. Losing the love of your life is not something that is attractive. Being a widower makes me feel that I do not fit into familiar social groups anymore. But over time I realized that my story can also be a blessing. Sharing what happened to me is particularly effective in connecting with other people across time and space who have gone through similar experiences.

There is a certain fellowship in loss into which we are drawn when we experience it. It can be a relief to discover that the aches we think are ours alone are also felt by so many others. And it is good to know, especially as a man, that it is all right to cry, that it is all right to turn to others for help, that it is all right to be confused and not to know what to do, that it is perfectly normal to have feelings of envy and anger, that it is all right to be scared of living without the person you love so much, not knowing how to master the future alone. It is also all right to see that there are still moments of light and hope, of unexpected support and encouragement. There are glimpses of faith. These precious parts of the story need to be told as well and deserve to be shared.

Of the many things that could be talked about and that I have shared in greater detail in my book (Hasel, 2024). I would like to briefly point out two aspects that have become meaningful and significant in my grieving experience. The first is that grief is synonymous with the loss of many things, but not for a lack of love. In fact, grief exists because we love (Hasel, 2024, p. 67-70). Grief only exists because it is an expression of our love for the person who died. Just as incredibly complex and rich, our love weaves its way in every part of who we are. Grief touches us in remarkable and often rather unexpected ways, reminding us of things we shared, and that we loved. The smell of her favorite perfume. A picture that reminds you of a vacation spent together. Her favorite music. A hymn sang at church that resonates with my experience. The list is endless. Grief is as numerous and as complex as the love that created those countless moments that made life beautiful and interesting. I once believed that there are certain stages of grief that I had to master to finally get over it. I thought that I had to learn to leave grief behind and move on. Should it surprise me then, that many years later I still think of her almost every day? No! Not at all! How could I ever forget her? Some may think that I am stuck in my grief and that I need closure so that I can move on. But I don't feel stuck in my grief. I am a happy person. I live a delightful life. I love all my son's and my daughter-in-law and my sweet granddaughter. I have a fulfilling and satisfying career that challenges me to learn new things and helps me grow in knowledge and skills. I enjoy the company of a few very good and close friends. I am content – and mostly happy. Yes, I miss my wife. Why shouldn't I? It makes sense to me. She was my first love. She is the mother of my sons. I still love her. Will I ever stop loving silently her who I once loved out loud? Grief, like love, is not a process that is neatly divided into different stages that you can pass through and finally leave behind. This is not how grief works. But if we understand that we experience grief only because we have experienced love, we realize that we grieve our loss only because we loved the person in the first place. The stronger our love for the person who died, the more intense our grief will be. Our grief is proportional to the depth to which someone we love has touched our life. Grieving by its very nature confirms worth. It is only when we understand our grief as an expression of our love that we gain a helpful and healing perspective of how to process it. This is true no matter whether you stay single or remarry.

The memory of your love remains. Love is! Love does not want to be left behind. Love does not want to “move on.” True love wants to be there – with the other – forever. To expect to leave this behind and forget about it would mean to forget and ignore our love. To move on without grief would be a betrayal of our love. The challenge is to integrate grief into our lives in such a way that we can see it as part of our love. We will continue to live, and we will continue to grieve, because we continue to love. This love will be with us as we discern new ways of living without forgetting. The good news is: grief lasts as long as love last!

The other important lesson I learned in my grief is the lost art of lament (Hasel, 2024, p. 46-51). Many confessing Christians find it difficult to express their true feelings when facing tragedy, suffering, and loss. The discrepancy between the pain they feel over the loss of a loved person and the way they piously talk about it may lead to greater problems and can even negatively affect our spiritual perception and hinder a healing process in dealing with loss in life. The biblical practice of lament, however, helps us to deal with suffering, injustice, and the pain of death in healing ways. Lament invites us to be honest to God and to express our *grieve and* trust, our *struggling and* our believing. Lament is an expression of faith in which we honestly wrestle with the paradox of the reality of pain and the promise of God’s goodness. Lament is not complaining as an end in and of itself. Biblically speaking lament is only possible if we believe in God’s mercy, goodness, and grace. It is rooted in the conviction and hope that God will ultimately deliver, that God is good and almighty. Without such a belief there would be no lament! Lament helps us deal with the harsh reality of a hard and unfair life while trusting in God’s love and ultimate sovereignty. It processes our pain. Without the practice of lament bitterness and anger will quickly dampen our spiritual life and even kill it. Lament acknowledges the injustice that is in this sinful world and that bad things happen even to very good people while still declaring that suffering and pain will not have the final say. God is not offended by our lament. The Psalm writers have taught us repeatedly to express lament. It is interesting to note that at least one third of the 150 psalms are laments. This makes lament the largest category in the Psalter. And, one entire book of the Bible, the book of Lamentations, is devoted to lament! In lament we stop pretending. In lament we acknowledge that we are no longer in control of our situation. In lament we honestly pour out our heart to God in our felt absence of God’s shalom. The example of numerous biblical writers and heroes of faith tells us that lament is not wrong (Vroegop, 2019). In fact, it is essential to deal with pain and suffering in healing ways. But true lament can happen only in the context of a trusting and loving relationship with God. It is not a wallowing in our complaints. As we surrender our pain and even the things we do not understand, He shifts our focus toward God Himself. In biblical lament our last word is about the object of our hope, the very one all laments long for and lead us to: Jesus, who through his suffering and death on the cross has saved us and who therefore understands our frailty and need (Hebrews 4:15-16).

To be honest with God without pretending, to be vulnerable in His sight and to express my fears to the One who does understand even though I do not understand, has a transforming effect. I cannot explain this experience. I can only humbly testify the truth that as painful as the death of

a deeply loved person is, there is a miracle that is even greater than this terrible experience and that is God's amazing grace. The Bible tells us that "the Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning. Great is Your faithfulness (Lam. 3:22-23 NASB). While death and grief can cause us to fall abysmal deep, we fall no deeper than into the loving arms of God. For his heart is touched by our grief and he is the one who sustains us even when we don't understand. You are not alone!

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# TEACHING CREATION TO OUR CHILDREN

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BY JOSEPH KIDDER AND KATELYN CAMPBELL WEAKLEY

## THE MARVEL OF CREATION

Revelation and nature both testify that the universe is an incredible place. As scientists discover fact after fact about the natural world, this truth becomes even more evident. For example, the sequences of genes found within every living thing that gives characteristic makeup, such as DNA, are quite small. Yet if all the DNA in your body were unraveled and laid end to end, it would measure 34 billion miles long: that's the length it would take to travel to and from Pluto six times! Speaking of our solar system, scientists have determined that our sun accounts for 99.86% of the total mass of our solar system; in fact, Earth could fit inside the sun 1.3 million times! Scientists have also estimated that there may be as many as three sextillion stars in the universe (300,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000), which is more than the total grains of sand found on Earth (Sundermier, 2016). Nature is truly amazing!

But where did it come from? Where do *we* come from? The Psalmist writes, “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork” (Psalm 19:1). The natural world is intricate and beautiful, reflecting the wisdom, might, and love of its Creator. This is where all our stories begin: in the hands of the Creator.

After God created the world, He created us in His own image, but with the introduction of sin into the world, that image was marred. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” (Romans 3:23). But Scripture tells us that there will be a re-creation and restoration of that image

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through the grace of Jesus. “Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:24).

This article intends to give parents, guardians, and educators ideas for teaching Creation to children. As you explore the Creation story with them and what it means to be made in the image of God, there are many concepts to discuss. The Creation story demonstrates how valuable we are to God. It teaches us that we are always loved and meant to have access to Him and to enjoy His presence. Furthermore, the story moves beyond Creation to teach the entrance of sin and God’s plan to restore His image within us.

This article examines the principles of teaching children about Creation. However, these principles can be used in teaching any passage of Scripture or doctrine.

## THE FAITH FORMATION OF CHILDREN

In their article entitled “Best Practices in Children’s Faith Formation,” John Roberto and Katie Pfiffner state that “effective faith formation with children respects the ways children learn today by offering learning activities that are experiential, image-rich, multi-sensory, interactive, engaging, and varied in learning” (Roberto & Pfiffner, 2021). There are lessons to be learned through doing everyday life.

As events transpire, as your family experiences life together, see what connections to scripture you can find. What lessons of morality can be learned? What aspects of God’s character can be seen? Pray that God would open your eyes to see what lessons you can bring out of everyday life and then simply begin sharing them with your children. Ask them questions about what they see and experience. Ask them how it connects to what they know of God and the Bible. Point out Christian values and morals. As you practice having these conversations with your children, it will gradually become part of your daily routine, and your children will eagerly engage.

## THE BIBLICAL TEACHING OF CREATION

### THE CREATION OF THE WORLD

Let’s look at God’s work of bringing everything we know into existence. “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth...For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast” (Psalm 33:6,9). “You who laid the foundations of the earth, so that it should not be moved forever” (Psalm 104:5). These verses from Scripture answer our question of origin: through God, all else came into existence. “All things were made through Him, and without Him, nothing was made that was made” (John 1:3). “For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist” (Colossians 1:16-17). Throughout Genesis chapter 1, God speaks each day, and the world flourishes more and more. Over and over,

God comes to the end of His day of creating, looks over the world, and sees that it is good (Genesis 1:4,10,12,18,21,25).

Ellen White describes the pristine world in this way:

“As the earth came forth from the hand of its Maker, it was exceedingly beautiful. Its surface was diversified with mountains, hills, and plains, interspersed with noble rivers and lovely lakes... Graceful shrubs and delicate flowers greeted the eye at every turn. The heights were crowned with trees more majestic than any that now exist. The air, untainted by foul miasma, was clear and healthful. The entire landscape outvied in beauty the decorated grounds of the proudest palace. The angelic host viewed the scene with delight and rejoiced at the wonderful works of God” (White, 1890).

Ellen White and the writers of Scripture marveled in awe at God’s creative power and the beauty of His creations. We are to impart this same awe and wonder to our children, to help them begin to understand the power, character, and beauty of their Creator.

### THE CREATION OF ADAM AND EVE

God’s final touch in creation? Man and woman. “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:26-27). As humans, therefore, we were created in the image of our Creator with His same moral sensitivity (Criswell, 1982). He is the reason for our existence. Max Lucado writes, “You weren’t an accident. You weren’t mass-produced. You aren’t an assembly-line product. You were deliberately planned, specifically gifted, and lovingly positioned on the Earth by the Master Craftsman” (Lucado, 1999). In His hands is where your story began and where your story continues. “For in Him we live and move and have our being...” (Acts 17:28a).

But *why*? Why did God choose to create humans? Why did He decide that you and I should exist? Why are we even here? In John 17:3, Christ is praying to His Father in Heaven, saying, “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” Jesus prayed that we would *know* God. This was part of the original plan of why we were created—that we would know our God.

We were also created to love God. Deuteronomy 6:5 states, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” God created us so that we may love Him, but He didn’t decide this selfishly. God also created us so that He could love us and we could enjoy Him. “Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:4). “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be



called children of God...” (1 John 3:1). We were meant to be recipients of love and delight through the hand of God. Ellen White notes God lovingly blessed Adam and Eve in such a way that they could truly enjoy their world. “The Lord blessed Adam and Eve with intelligence that He had not given to any other creature. He made Adam the rightful sovereign over all the works of His hands. Man, made in the divine image, could contemplate and appreciate the glorious works of God in nature” (White, 1974).

Given all these reasons, we were created to bring God glory, which is the lesson we must pass on to our children. “You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created” (Revelation 4:11). God deserves praise and honor. Our voices were meant to be raised to Him in awe and appreciation. For these reasons, God intended our existence: that we might know God, love Him, be loved by Him, and give Him praise, honor, and glory (Revelation 7:10-12).

## TEACHING THE CREATIVE POWER OF GOD

God’s Creation was not done haphazardly; it was all meticulously designed. Jesus Himself says, “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these” (Matthew 6:28a-29). This means there is much for us to marvel at and appreciate in God’s creation. It also means there is much to learn and teach. Here are several ways to guide your child in understanding key concepts related to God’s creative power.

### READING SCRIPTURE

Often, the best way to begin teaching your children about the marvel of Creation is to simply start reading the Bible with them. Use a child-friendly Bible translation and start with Genesis 1 and 2. Talk with your child about what it might have been like to be there and see God speaking everything into existence. Compare the nature we see now with the descriptions found in those first two chapters. Then, perhaps read Genesis 3 together and explore the differences that filled the earth after Adam and Eve ate the fruit. Ask your child how they would have felt if they were Adam or Eve in this story. After reading Genesis 3, this can also be an excellent opportunity to begin exploring the reason for Jesus’ salvation with them.

The Psalms are also filled with examples of connecting creation to the Creator. For example, in Psalm 139, King David writes about the intimate connection between us and God: “For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother’s womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well.” David’s awe and amazement at his own creation is something you can pass on to your children as you consider with them the intricacies and complexities of their own bodies. Read portions of Psalms together (such as Psalms 8, 19, and 104), and talk with your child about the interconnection between the created world and its Creator.

## USING THE SHEMA

God has given us instructions on how to teach our children about Him in a passage of Scripture known as the Shema.

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

A primary idea of the Shema is the ongoing experience of teaching children. The Lord instructs parents to teach their children about Him at all times—from morning until night, at home and while traveling, at every given opportunity. God’s love for us and our love for him must continually be on our lips, passed along to our children. “I will open my mouth in a parable,” writes the Psalmist, “I will utter dark sayings of old, which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, telling to the generation to come the praises of the Lord, and His strength and His wonderful works that He has done” (Psalms 78:2-4).

How can parents possibly spend all of their time teaching their children? When we look through the lens of daily instruction, we can begin to see opportunities for lessons about God throughout our daily experiences. As we walk in the park, as we see the rain falling, as we experience sunshine, as we care for our pets—all of these daily experiences and much more can be opportunities for us to teach our children about God, His creation, His love, and His plans for our lives.

## USE CREATIVE ACTIVITIES

The work that went into the Creation week was something worthy of awe and amazement. God’s creative power is vastly beyond our own capacity. While humans have the incredible ability to create works of art with paints, clay, words, notes, and more, the best that any human can do is to express an idea or thing in a new way. No material is created out of nothing. There is no new masterpiece completely devoid of anything previously developed. But God had no limitations. He created everything out of nothing, something no human could ever do. God’s creative capacity is simply awe-inspiring (Erickson, 1985). However, even though God’s creative capacity far surpasses our own, He has instilled in us that same desire and ability to design and make works of art—from paintings to gardens to architecture.

Childhood is the perfect time to begin stretching creative muscles. Artistic activities such as drawing and simple crafts are perfect opportunities for parents to explore the ideas of God’s creation and humanity’s creativity as image bearers of God. What better way to learn about Creation than through engaging children in the creative process!

## MEMORIZE A KEY VERSE

Psalm 119:11 says, “Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You.” Ellen White echoes this sentiment by saying, “If the words of Jesus dwell in us, we shall represent his love, in kindness, in humility, in goodness, coming in close union with the people of God, and working as missionaries of Jesus wherever we have opportunity. Instead of seeking to glorify ourselves, we shall exalt the name that is above every name, Jesus, the center of all attraction” (White, 1892). Committing God’s Word to memory keeps our hearts, minds, and behaviors on track and in line with the lives God has called us to live.

When teaching stories, lessons, and ideas from the Bible, it is wise to incorporate some Scripture memorization. Children learn well through repetition, making the memorization of Bible verses a very useful tool for helping children grasp the concepts found in the Creation story. The Creation account in Scripture is very lyrical and full of important concepts: “So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:27). Pick a key verse or two to help your child learn and internalize the Creation story.

## CONCLUSION

In the account of the creation of the world, the explanation for why and how the world and humanity came to be is found. It explains our supreme Creator’s existence and tells who He is. In fact, all of nature testifies of His power and character. Ellen White writes of this beautiful phenomenon, saying,

“Nature and revelation alike testify of God’s love. Our Father in heaven is the source of life, of wisdom, and of joy. Look at the wonderful and beautiful things of nature. Think of their marvelous adaptation to the needs and happiness, not only of man, but of all living creatures. The sunshine and the rain, that gladden and refresh the earth, the hills and seas and plains, all speak to us of the Creator’s love” (White, 1892).

God’s love can be seen all throughout His creation, everywhere we look. White continues the discussion of this display: “From the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy, declare that God is love” (White, 1911).

This is the beautiful work of God’s nature in our lives: it tells us of His love and draws us to Him. Apologetics author Eric Lyons writes,

“Indeed, the beauty, splendor, and design of God’s creation should drive us closer to the Creator. His ‘fingerprints’ should make us stand in awe of Him. They should drive us to our knees in worship of Him. And they should compel us to tell others about Him. As the psalmist sang, we should ‘declare His glory among the nations,

His wonders among all peoples. For the Lord is great and greatly to be praised’ ([Psalm]96:3-4)” (Lyons, 2021).

The God of creation is a God of love, deserving our worship and praise. His heart of love and His vast power means we can trust Him to care for us. These are important ideas to begin teaching our children from a young age.

In this article, we examined several ways to teach the story and lessons of Creation. You may find more methods that work well with your children. The most important way of teaching your children is simply to be intentional and seize every opportunity.

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# THE SEVEN SECRETS OF STORM-RESILIENT FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

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BY GABOR MIHALEC

Since 2020, our lives have undergone significant changes. Initially, we thought the pandemic posed only a health and economic threat, but since then, we've come to realize it has also severely strained our relationships. Couple therapists are busier than ever before, and internationally, divorce rates have surged. Domestic abuse has become rampant in many places, prompting the UN to classify it as a "shadow pandemic" alongside COVID-19. This was followed by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and a subsequent surge in inflation, energy crisis, uncertainty, and threat. It's no wonder families and relationships feel more burdened than in previous decades.

What sets apart those couples and families who have buckled under the pressure of recent years, drifting towards dissolution or even breaking apart, from those who have managed to grow steadily, even amidst crises? This was the question I posed during the first wave of lockdowns when I sought answers through a survey of 1,300 participants. We analyzed nearly 100,000 data points to find precise answers and provide tools for couples and families to thrive. We identified the differences between the two groups in 7 key points, all of which are learnable!

The findings of this research are summarized in the book "Storm Proof Love," (Mihalec, 2021), which I wrote with a focus on making each chapter equivalent to a 1.5-hour seminar, suitable for in-person or online delivery. The chapters end with exercises to enhance interactivity, which are conducted with participating couples during the seminar.

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## 1. EXPRESSING EMOTIONS

Couples whose relationships strengthened during times of crisis were skilled at involving each other in their emotional world. Even if they experienced negative emotions (fear, uncertainty, sadness), expressing them brought them closer together because it elicited empathy in the other person.

In tense situations, arguing and rational communication create distance. It gives the impression that we are not important to the other person. However, emotions bring people closer together. When we start talking to our partner about our emotions, it evokes trust, creates empathy, and bridges the gap. The physical distance between two people begins to narrow, their voices become quieter, and a confidential atmosphere is established between them.

But how do we talk about our emotions if no one has taught us how? The technique of sports commentary can be very helpful in mastering the expression of emotions. Sports commentators have a fantastic ability to make us see what is happening on the field through verbal communication alone, while we are traveling in a car and only see the asphalt. Imagine that the emotional storm raging within us is a football match in our hearts, and the emotions are the players. Let's start by naming the players on the field (labeling emotions)! Instead of Ronaldo, let's say there is anger; instead of Messi, there is fear, and instead of Szoboszlai, there is hope. Once we have identified all the players on the field, let's say who is moving where and what they are doing. For example, anger pushes forward aggressively. Fear is running alongside. But opposite them, there is hope; although it's running slowly and weakly, at least it's on the field.

Once you have become proficient in emotional broadcasting as a sports commentator, it's time for the next step. Now, move from the commentator's seat to the coach's seat, and don't just observe what's happening on the field; be the ones who determine what happens on the field! Instead of being observers, let's become the directors of our emotional lives and regain control over our emotions!

## 2. KEEP CALM EVEN IN CHALLENGING SITUATIONS

Couples who thrive under pressure take responsibility for their own tension and process it within themselves rather than projecting it onto each other.

Have you ever noticed how quickly we can switch from being angry to being kind when, for example, our phone rings in the middle of scolding our child? Just as we can be kind to strangers and not let ourselves get carried away with angry behavior towards them, we should also speak calmly and kindly to our loved ones!

This is something that pet care books also teach us. Cesar Millan's description of why some dogs become uncontrollably disobedient around their owners is enlightening. The solution lies in a behavior, or perhaps an attitude, which Millan calls "calm confidence." "A dog can express dominance over another simply by moving calmly and assertively and by claiming space. [...] On the other hand, humans use words and rely on them in dialogue and written communication.

Because of our intellectual capacity for speech, we easily lose touch with our own energy and have no idea what we are conveying to the world. [...] To be a successful pack leader - and generally a successful human being - you need to be able to pay attention to your energy and learn to adjust it when you are not in a calm and confident state of mind” (Millan, 2010).

Self-soothing is a learnable skill! It’s not about being naturally fiery or calm, but about what behavioral patterns we have reinforced within ourselves over the years. And if we’re capable of exploding, then we’re capable of extinguishing the fire too.

### 3. INTIMATE BONDING

Stress affects our sexuality in various ways. For some, it increases their appetite, while others completely lose interest in intimacy. This change often leads in two different directions within a relationship. Strong couples understand how stress affects their own and their partner’s sexual experiences, and they strive to create intimate moments, even in changed circumstances, where they can express tenderness towards each other.

So, let’s pause for a moment and think back to a difficult, emotionally taxing moment. What would you have done if your partner had approached you sexually at that time? Perhaps this actually happened, so it’ll be easy to recall. Did you welcome the approach and feel relieved? Or did it make you even more tense, causing you to turn away from your spouse? This can already help you determine how stress affects your sexual appetite. Whatever the deviation from normal mode, this reaction is completely healthy, a normal human response to stress. However, it can be very frustrating and often deeply hurtful when a husband’s libido goes up while his wife’s goes down. (By the way, this is the average tendency, but the reverse also exists.)

Understanding from the partner who has lost their sexual appetite towards the sexually active partner is crucial in such situations. If you know what sex means to your partner on deeper levels, you can handle their approach in a way that provides intimacy without having to engage in intercourse. If you say to them, “I can’t believe it! Seriously, you’re only thinking about sex at a time like this? Just leave me alone. Can’t you see I’m not in the mood?” This will surely drive a wedge between you two. But you could also say, “Honey, I can see that you would really enjoy being intimate right now, and I would too if we weren’t in this situation. But I wouldn’t be able to relax right now. However, you need to know that you’re very important to me, and I’m glad you’re my husband.” After such a response, the couple’s strong bond remains intact without engaging in intercourse.

### 4. FINANCIAL SECURITY

During crises, tension often prevails in families living from one month to the next. In contrast, households that have made reserves tend to have a calmer and more loving atmosphere.

Every economic unit should have reserves equivalent to at least three, preferably six months’ worth of operating expenses. This means that if the inward cash flow is cut off tomorrow, the given

economic unit would still be able to operate for six months. Since the family is also an economic unit, it should have at least this much savings available.

When I talk about this at a seminar, someone usually remarks, “It’s easy to save if you have something to save from.” If our family’s financial security is important to us, then we should quickly erase this kind of argument from our minds! No one will take financial responsibility for our family if we don’t! This is a responsibility that cannot be delegated in any direction. And savings are not dependent on income but primarily on mindset!

The famous relationship researcher David Olson aptly notes: “Economic hardship and problems in couple and family relationships are often related. Researchers have found that divorce, marital separation, domestic violence, and the abuse of alcohol and other drugs are more likely among people with low incomes than in any other socioeconomic group [...]. Earning an adequate income and managing money effectively are important for a couple’s and a family’s well-being. If they have enough money to meet their basic needs, couples and families can focus on enhancing the quality of their lives and relationships” (Olson, 2006).

Our own research has supported this observation. There was a clear correlation between lack of savings and higher alcohol consumption, and the emergence of physical violence.

A family budget plan is an excellent tool for this process. There are many definitions of a budget, but the one I like best is budgeting, which means telling your money where to go instead of wondering where it went at the end of the month.

## 5. ORDER AND PERSONAL GROOMING

When faced with something we cannot control, we can better cope with it by starting to control what we do have power over.

Many studies examining resilience in difficult times have overlooked this factor. Still, we discovered that couples who maintained order in their homes during quarantine, didn’t neglect their personal grooming, dressed nicely, and took care of their bodies even during home-office hours were in much better relationships with each other than those where disorder prevailed. Home, where disorder prevailed, revealed couples who wandered around the house with five-day-old stubble, mustard-stained tank tops and spent their days watching series until 2 a.m., then were non-functional until 11 a.m. the next morning.

Interestingly, drug prevention programs targeting children have also drawn attention to this phenomenon. Children who keep their rooms tidy are much less likely to turn to drugs or alcohol as teenagers and are better able to resist peer pressure. The main message is: “Keep order around you! An orderly environment results in orderly thinking, and those who think orderly resist pressure and temptation!” (Mfune, 2016).

We couldn’t choose to have a pandemic, war, or other measures affecting us. But we can decide whether to clean up, shave, and follow a routine in difficult situations.



## 6. EMOTIONAL AVAILABILITY

While the previous five steps are very practical, the last two are more about factors that determine the atmosphere, the climate of the relationship, and the long-term result of repeated decisions.

You've surely noticed that every home has its own air and climate. When we enter a stranger's house, we inhale the air and feel whether fear, respect, or love reigns there. Strong couples are emotionally available to each other. Emotional availability means that the parties can emotionally connect, be touched by what happens to the other (they can cry and laugh together), and rely on each other's active support in times of trouble.

We are creatures designed for attachment! Our brains are wired to need the closeness, touch, and comfort of other people. As far back as the 1700s, it was observed that children in orphanages who received all physical care but did not have their deep need for attachment fulfilled, died of sadness. In the 1940s, children left alone in hospitals were said to fall into a state of "debilitating grief." It has become generally accepted that children need the touch of a loved one's secure emotional attachment. However, for a long time, it was thought that adults outgrow this emotional dependence. Those who remain dependent on others as adults, needing protection, closeness, and love, were labeled weak, immature, codependent, undifferentiated, symbiotic, and fused, even in psychology. They even idealized those who were sovereign, independent, and autonomous. Think of James Bond or the heroes of the Marvel and DC universes (Batman, Spider-Man, Thor, Superman, etc.). They are all cool, emotionally unapproachable, one-man armies. Maximum efficiency, minimal emotional expression. However, if we take a closer look at them, we find that most of them experienced severe emotional traumas in their childhoods (Batman witnesses his parents' murder in a dark alley; Spider-Man becomes an orphan and is raised in his uncle and aunt's house, his favorite uncle Ben dies in his arms; Superman is the sole survivor of his race and is sent to Earth...), and as adults, they are unable to commit, have no normal relationships, and have no children.

The paradigm shift was brought about by a psychologist named John Bowlby, who extended attachment theory from childhood to adulthood. In contrast to the previous position, Bowlby spoke of "effective dependence" and that one sign and source of strength is our ability to turn to others for emotional support 'from the cradle to the grave. This idea was further developed by the late Sue Johnson, who completely rephrased everything we thought about love. Thanks to her work we now know that love is actually the most irresistible survival mechanism of the human species. Not because it prompts but because love compels us to emotionally bond with those few, most valuable people who provide us with a safe haven amidst life's storms. Love is the fortress whose purpose is to provide us with emotional protection so that we can cope with the vicissitudes of existence. The need for emotional attachment is coded into our genes and our bodies. It is just as fundamental to health and happiness as the need for food, physical safety, and sex (Johnson, 2016).

## 7. HOPE FACTOR

As a pastor and couples therapist, perhaps this was the most exciting part of the research for me. Is there any connection between faith, spirituality, and whether a relationship progresses or declines in crisis? The numbers convincingly confirm that spirituality is an important component of relationship resilience, the ability to cope with difficulties. It is also clear that couples who live out their faith together (spiritually compatible) are more likely to be on a path of growth than those who do not engage in any religious life or do not live it in harmony with each other (spiritually incompatible couples). Depending on our personal attitude, faith can be a resource in a relationship, but it can also be a serious source of conflict. In the case of couples on a growing path, faith tends to be more of a resource.

The research has highlighted the significant role of shared faith in coping with difficulties. Strong couples not only rely on each other but also on their shared faith. Their source of strength is beyond visible reality. This provides them with peace and hope, opening up new solutions that were previously unseen. The crisis is also a test of faith, showing whether we followed something out of habit or formality or whether we truly identified with it deep inside.

The following table shows how the respondents answered questions related to faith. The percentage indicates the proportion of respondents who agreed with the statement.

Statement	Developing Couples	Declining Couples
I am satisfied with how we practice our faith.	64%	37%
In difficult times, we can rely on our faith.	73%	50%
Our shared faith brings us closer to each other.	63%	23%
The differences between our faith values cause tension in our relationship.	6%	16%
For us, faith is more a personal experience than a religious formality.	73%	49%

Perhaps not everyone knows what to make of the term “faith” or “spirituality” in a secular context, so I like to define it as the “Hope Factor.” Just as mentors search for the X-factor in talent shows, we can also look for the Hope Factor in difficult situations. Those who possess the Hope Factor see beyond the challenges and are able to grasp onto things that are not immediately visible.

We can summarize the seven factors as follows:



## STORM-RESILIENT TRAINING PLAN

We've looked at the seven secrets of storm-resistant family and love relationships, and now the question remains: How can you make your relationship storm-resistant too? I like to imagine this as a barrel with seven staves, each representing one of the seven factors listed and each of varying lengths. What determines how much water the barrel can hold? The answer is very simple: The water will spill out at the lowest staff (Schwarz, 1996). Therefore, we must recognize the weakest point of our relationship and develop it so that the imaginary barrel can hold as much water as possible, meaning our relationship becomes as storm-resistant as possible.

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# HUMAN SEXUALITY, MARRIAGE, AND DIVORCE

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BY EKKEHARDT MUELLER

## I. THE PRESENT-DAY SITUATION

Our current age is, among other things, characterized by an enormous emphasis on sexuality and gender issues in which all former norms and conventions seem to be questioned.

Recently, a major newspaper published an article claiming that every healthy woman can handle five lovers.<sup>1</sup> The future of sex is proclaimed to be “free love with any number of sex partners.” The term to describe such behavior is “polyamorous.”<sup>2</sup> An article in the *Encyclopedia of Evolutionary Psychological Science* declares: “There is little doubt that the ‘natural’ mating system for human beings is polygamy, which includes two different reproductive arrangements: polygyny and polyandry. In polygyny, one man mates with more than one woman, a ‘harem’ as traditionally understood. In polyandry, one woman mates with more than one man” (Barash)<sup>3</sup>. Being married to one spouse of the opposite sex in a lifelong union is declared to be against nature.<sup>4</sup> But today monogamy is sometimes defined not as fidelity “in terms of sexual behavior but rather by emotional commitment to each other” (Kort).<sup>5</sup> That means you may have sexual encounters with multiple persons but consider yourself to be emotionally committed to just one and, therefore, monogamous. This points to the current understanding of the fluidity of gender and sexuality and reveals constant

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redefinitions of terms related to sexuality so that it is easy to misunderstand each other. Language must be more and more precise and elaborate to describe what is meant.

The gender and queer revolutions<sup>6</sup> have affected marriage. Either marriage is considered (1) to be obsolete or (2) on the other hand, desirable for all kinds of sexual relations or (3) a serial arrangement that is designed from its very beginning to last only a limited time to be replaced with another marriage or other marriages in the future. The latter involves what is typically called “divorce.” Serial divorces are also considered by some to be a form of polygamy (Kort).<sup>7</sup>

The reader may easily discern that much of gender theory and teaching about sexuality is based on an evolutionary model of the origin of life and humanity and on a form of humanism in which the human being is understood to be autonomous and quasi its own center to the exclusion of the supernatural, that is God.

## II. THE BIBLICAL MODEL FOR MARRIAGE AND SEXUALITY: CREATION AND RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

The Biblical model is quite different. Instead of self-sufficient humanity, there are God and human beings. According to Scripture, humans were created by God and did not come into existence through a long evolutionary process with the survival of the fittest.

While like animals in natural functions, humanity was and is distinct from the animal kingdom and was made in the image of God with certain prerogatives, responsibilities, and especially the privilege of an intimate relationship with the Creator God. It is crucial to recognize that humanity is designed for a life with God. Humans are always dependent on God’s love, care, and sustaining power.

Human beings were created as one male and one female—Adam and Eve (Gen 1:26-31; 2:7, 15-25). Gender and sex were not distinct as it is postulated today. Adam and Eve were given to each other in a heterosexual, lifelong marriage, the wedding performed by God Himself. Genesis 2:24, which seems to be a description by Moses, is declared by Jesus to be God the Father’s saying (Matt 19:4-5), indicating that indeed God joined the two humans together permanently in marriage. The gift of sexuality was given to humans so they could enjoy wholistic intimacy and procreation. Genesis 2:24 is paradigmatic because Adam and Eve did not have human parents. Yet in the future, married couples would become one entity, each one flesh in a wholistic way—because Scripture does not separate body, mind, and emotions from each other—independent to some extent from their parents. The account of the creation of the male and the female points to their equality, difference in sex, their exclusive relationship with each other, their complementarity, and their support of each other.

While the creation account indicates a plurality in God (“Let *us* make man in our image”—Gen 1:26), the NT is very clear that Jesus is also the Creator. For instance, Colossians 1:13-14 speaks about God’s “Son of His love in whom we have redemption through His blood.” “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn [that is the king—see Ps 89:27] over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether

thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.” Thus, we are not only talking about a transcendent Creator God but the immanent Jesus Christ who has created us. And it is this Jesus who has promised His followers abundant life (John 10:10) if they love Him and keep His commandments (John 14:21; 15:10). Therefore, it is more than reasonable to follow the OT commandments pertaining to marriage and sexuality as well as Jesus’ instructions in the NT. They are given to guarantee a fulfilled and blessed life as singles and as married couples.

### III. SOME DEFINITIONS

We must stop for a moment and briefly define concepts related to sexuality and sexual activity from a biblical perspective.

1. *Love and sexual intimacy.*

Sex is not necessarily love, as taken in common parlance. To the contrary, sexual activity can be very self-centered, self-satisfying, even disgusting, dehumanizing, and abusive. This is not the purpose of God’s gift. Biblical love is oriented to the other person his or her well-being in its totality—physically, mentally, and emotionally. It is self-giving (cf. 1 John 4:9-10). Therefore, Zoltán Szalos-Farkas speaks about the “spirituality of human sexuality,”<sup>8</sup> and Thomas Domanyi states: “From a biblical perspective, the sexual act must be embedded within an all-embracing, positive, and personal affirmation of the other, epitomizing an unconditional willingness to coexisting” (Domanyi, p. 103).<sup>9</sup> This is one of the reasons that God has given sexual intimacy to be exercised only in the context of marriage. But unfortunately, even in marriage, the gift of sexuality can be abused, contrary to God’s will.

2. *Marriage.*

Marriage is a prominent concept in Scripture. It does not only refer to human marriage (Heb 13:4) but also to the relationship between God and His children (Eph 5:22; Rev 19:7). Human marriage is understood as the connection of a male and a female in a permanent and intimate relationship to be governed by mutual love. Scripture does not envision divorce as a divine ideal or as something to be sought because God hates divorce (Mal 2:16). Furthermore, a homosexual relation is not a marriage but is prohibited (Lev 18:22; 20:13; Rom 1:26-27).

3. *Monogamy, polygamy, etc.*

It seems that these days we encounter a strange phenomenon. While in human societies, emphasis on sexuality seems to be ever-present and sexual activity may be seen as one of the highest goods, on the other hand it is somehow cheap and downplayed in terms of personal relations and consequences. As mentioned above, the idea may, for instance, be that one can have multiple and interchangeable sexual partners—and it does not matter—but one feels committed to only one person and therefore claims to live a monogamous life. People do

not understand the high value and the true nature of human sexuality in Scripture. Even Christians question why problems with sexuality sometimes weigh more than other sins.<sup>10</sup> But Scripture does not play games with monogamy, polygamy, and other questionable sexual activities. It does not separate sexuality from commitment, true love, and marriage.

4. *Adultery and sexual immorality.*

Biblically, the term “adultery” (*moicheia*) and its verb “to commit adultery” describe a sexual relation with a person other than one’s spouse (Exod 20:14; John 8:3).<sup>11</sup> In OT times, a person involved in adultery was liable for capital punishment (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22; see also John 8:5). The term “sexual immorality” (*porneia*) and its related terms typically describe the overarching problem of sexuality gone wrong and includes issues such as adultery, bestiality, incest, and others.<sup>12</sup> To claim that the meaning of *porneia* surpasses sexual sins does not define the biblical term biblically and would allow for all kinds of maneuvers to accommodate one’s own view. Neither “adultery” nor “sexual immorality” can be redefined, for instance, as “violence” without being unfaithful to Scripture. Although sexuality may at times be violent, the terms mentioned above focus on the sexual aspect.

## IV. UNACCEPTABLE SEXUAL BEHAVIOR IN GENESIS AFTER THE FALL

Genesis 1 and 2 describe humanity and marriage in positive terms. This changes with the entrance of sin into the world. People are sinners in an environment affected by sin, and they create chaos. There is no direct report that the Ten Commandments were given to the antediluvians and the patriarchs, but it can be assumed that these people knew at least partially the divine law: Cain’s murder was absolutely horrible. Lying, even under difficult circumstances is not endorsed. On the other hand, we hear that Abraham obeyed God’s commandments (Gen 26:5). Regarding sexuality, the following non-acceptable acts are mentioned in Genesis:

Mixed marriages	Gen 6:1-5; 38:1-5
Putting one’s wife in a situation in which she may be led to unwillingly fall into adultery	Gen 12:10-20; 20; 26:1-11
Polygamy with the consequence of creating dysfunctional families	Gen 16; 21:9-14; 29:21-30:22
Homosexuality	Gen 19:4-6
Incest	Gen 19:30-38; 35:22; 38: 49:4
Rape	Gen 34:1-7
Prostitution	Gen 38
Attempted adultery	Gen 39:7-18

Later in the Pentateuch, the Seventh Commandment occurs, prohibiting sexuality gone wrong. Furthermore, specific and detailed legislation is provided, dealing with the issues mentioned above (e.g., Lev 18 and 20) and other issues such as premarital sex and divorce (e.g., Deut 21:10-14; 22:5, 13-30; Deut 24:1-4; 25:5-10).

Jesus and the NT also oppose the different types of sexual immorality mentioned here (e.g., Matt 5:27-32; Mark 7:20-23; 10:2-12; Acts 15:19-21; 1 Cor 5:1-5; 6:9-11). Some issues may be more prominent today than they were in the past. Some are new challenges, for instance, cybersex and robotic sex. But they are either directly addressed by Scripture or are covered by biblical principles.<sup>13</sup>

At the end the question for us is if we are willing to follow Jesus and His Word, confess our shortcomings, and ask Him for forgiveness and help for living a new and fulfilled life as He has promised.

## V. REASONS FOR DIVORCE

Now we turn to the problem of divorce. Divorce has become widespread, and the reasons why it is sought vary. Divorce rates in Christian circles almost match those in non-Christian and secular circles. Many couples are unhappy and suffering. Even those who have been married for decades are not exempt from getting a divorce. In 2018, Kathy McCoy wrote: “The Baby Boomers, who started turning 50 in 1996, haven’t been quite so reluctant to divorce [as their parents have]—either in youthful or mature marriages. That may explain, at least in part, the increase in gray divorce. In 1990, 5 out of 1,000 married people over 50 divorced. By 2010, it was 10 out of 1,000...According to a recent study, those who have been divorced before are more likely to divorce again, and those in marriages of shorter duration are more likely to divorce...For those over 50, the rate of divorce for those who are in remarriages is 2.5 times higher than for those in first marriages. And those in remarriages of less than 10 years duration are nearly 10 times more likely to divorce than those married 40 years or more . . .” (McCoy).<sup>14</sup>

Marriage can be very rewarding and can be a reminder of paradise. However, being married also requires work to make marriage a success. Also, in many cases people experience great pain in their marriages.

### 1. JESUS’ REASON THAT MAY ALLOW PEOPLE TO GET A DIVORCE

The question is what Scripture teaches about divorce and which biblical reasons are given that would allow people to get a divorce.

- a. Divorce was not God’s plan. It was not foreseen in the creation account, and it contradicts the will of God. Jesus makes This clear in His Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:31-32) and in His discussion with the Pharisees about reasons for divorce (Matthew 19:1-12; Mark 10:1-12; cf. Luke 16:18).



- b. Despite the emphasis on the permanence of marriage, divorce happened in Israel anyway. In a patriarchal society it was difficult for women to be divorced. The legislation about the certificate of divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 must be seen as God trying to mitigate the trouble of divorce for women who were no longer virgins, may have lost their entire support system—especially if they could no longer return to their parents, and had no adult children to assist them, had to live with the shame of being divorcees, and may have had a difficult time finding a new spouse.
- c. In Israel, a husband was required to have a reason for divorcing his wife. Without a reason no divorce could take place. The reason was “some indecency.” The Hebrew phrase ‘erwat *dābār* in Deuteronomy 24:1 describes sexually inappropriate behavior but not adultery. The latter was to be punished with the death penalty (Lev 20:10).<sup>15</sup> Indecency was not an issue that would prevent a woman’s remarriage. At the time of Jesus, indecency included a wife being seen in public with an uncovered head or with bare arms. Later it encompassed, for instance, an outgoing attitude, spinning or drinking eagerly on the street, and bathing with men. Thus, it seems to have been influenced by cultural conventions. However, the rabbinical school of Hillel went beyond these restrictions and allowed a husband to divorce his wife basically for any reason.
- d. Jesus had to rectify the problem and stop the abuse of the OT legislation which anyway was only provisional and an accommodation to the “hardness of heart” of the Israelites (Matt 19:9). He did this in the Sermon on the Mount by referring to the text about the letter of divorce (Deut 24:1,3) and reestablishing the divine ideal and will: divorce is not legitimate. He regulated that the only possible exception is sexual immorality (*porneia*) by one spouse, which basically amounts to adultery in various forms.
- e. Later, Jesus was drawn into a dispute with the Pharisees on the question of whether divorce was possible for any reason. He pointed to the creation of humans as male and female and their union in marriage as one flesh, concluding, “Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate” and declaring the Mosaic legislation provisional and overcome (Matt 19:4-6, 8; Mark 10:5-9). Mark 10 and Luke 16:18 contain no exception clause. In Matthew 19:9, the exception clause reads: “And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery” (Mark 10:12).<sup>16</sup>

Result: Two of Jesus’ sayings have no exception clause and can be understood as no tolerance for divorce at all. The other two passages do not allow for divorce except in one case only, and this is sexual immorality by one partner. And even in this case forgiveness may be the better option, if it is possible (see the context of Matt 18:21-35).

## 2. OTHER REASONS SUGGESTED THAT WOULD ALLOW PEOPLE TO GET A DIVORCE

For many people today, Jesus' position seems to be too restricted. So, it is argued that Jesus knew only a fraction of the reasons for divorce or did not mention them despite his definite statements. If Jesus allowed divorce only in the case of adultery/sexual immorality, He must be unkind, limited, unable to make a comprehensive and absolute pronouncement on divorce, and, therefore, in need of help—according to such reasoning. But by opening the door to other grounds for divorce people are willing to question Jesus' divine-human nature, His wisdom and love, and His authority as well as Scripture's authority as the Word of God. Some have argued that the church has the right and power to make decisions and pronouncements in theological and ethical matters that go beyond the teachings and principles of the Bible or are contrary to them. This is more a Catholic than an Adventist approach. If this route is not pursued, but the broadening of the one reason for divorce to many reasons for divorce is still attempted, Scripture must be reinterpreted. And this is what happens.

By trying to stay with Scripture and yet finding other grounds for divorce, it has been claimed that the Bible contains such reasons, for example, neglect and domestic violence. A good example, at least for the first issue, seems to be 1 Corinthians 7, Paul's great chapter on singleness, marriage, and divorce. There is no question that both neglect and violence are serious issues and are unacceptable. But neglect and violence are different than a sin of omission (e.g., failing to help the needy) is not the same as a sin of commission (killing the neighbor). The Seventh-day Adventist Church has spoken strongly against violence<sup>17</sup> because it is clearly against the nature of Christ and His followers to behave violently and disregard people. Yet are neglect and/or violence biblical grounds for divorce?

Before we go to 1 Corinthians 7, we must understand a major difference between biblical laws. In Scripture, we distinguish between apodictic law ("You shall . . ." or "you shall not . . .") and casuistic or case law. Apodictic law is absolute. Case law does not legitimize the behavior exhibited (e.g., polygamy or divorce in Deut 24) but describes what under the given circumstances should be done (Davidson, pp. 192-193).<sup>18</sup>

In 1 Corinthians 7:2-5, Paul deals with sexual intimacy in heterosexual marriages and calls married couples not to give up such intimacy and not to deprive each other. If this happens anyway, it could be interpreted as neglect and as a reason for divorce. But did Paul have this in mind? In other words, is Paul's comment a command or a recommendation? If, for instance, sexual intercourse is an absolute duty in marriage, should a spouse get a divorce if the partner is no longer able to have sex due to an accident, illness, old age, etc.? In verse 6, Paul writes, "But I say this as a concession, not as a commandment," which may apply to verses 2-5. Obviously, the passage deals with case law and not apodictic law. In addition, Paul does not say a word about divorce here.<sup>19</sup> His comment may need to be understood in the background of ascetic tendencies in the early church, which he opposes (cf. 1 Tim 4:1-4).

When Paul finally deals with divorce in 1 Corinthians 7:10-24, he does not add to Jesus' apodictic pronouncement on divorce but dwells again on case law. In other words, he deals with

a specific situation, a mission situation in which the Gospel was heard by Gentiles in Greece, and only one spouse became a Christian while the other one did not. However, Paul does not allow the believer to initiate or pursue a divorce, only to accept it if the non-Christian desires it. Paul is, therefore, in full agreement with Jesus' legislation, even saying that the unbeliever and the children can be blessed through the believer if the marriage is maintained, and the believer must not divorce the unbeliever. A follower of Jesus can only opt for a divorce in the case of *porneia*.<sup>20</sup> Verses 21-24 about remaining in the condition in which we were called should also be understood in the context of marriage and divorce. Like Jesus, Paul would counsel Christians not to get a divorce. If, nevertheless, a wife leaves her husband she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband; likewise, he should not divorce her—1 Corinthians 7:10-11.

By arguing in favor of adding other reasons for divorce we may miss Jesus' strong opposition to divorce and His appreciation of marriage as God's good gift, given at creation: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery" (Mark 10:11). "I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason *except* sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery" (Matt 5:32). "I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, *except* for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery" (Matt 19:9).<sup>21</sup> We must not forget that Jesus speaks as Creator, Lawgiver, and Savior who has humans' best interests in mind, wanting them to live a fulfilled life (John 10:10).

But the question still is why are violence and neglect not mentioned by Jesus and Scripture as grounds for divorce? We do not know the answer precisely because our knowledge as humans is limited (1 Corinthians 13:12). But we still follow Jesus even if reasons for some of His teachings are not provided. Having said this, we may have a hint as to why neglect and violence are not biblical reasons for divorce. An answer may be found with the questions (1) What is neglect? and (2) If at all possible, which forms of violence would qualify for getting a divorce?

*Regarding the first question:* A believer—including a husband and father—must provide for his family (1 Tim 5:8). But what if he is no longer able to provide for their daily necessities? If today a husband becomes unemployed and has no income or only limited income, has he neglected his duties, and should his wife therefore, be allowed to get a divorce? This would be a strange understanding of marriage and would be quite merciless. According to Proverbs 31:10-31, a wife can also provide what is necessary for the survival of the family. But if she can no longer provide for the family, for instance, due to health reasons, should her husband be able to divorce her in her difficult situation? What neglect depends to some extent on the situation. Some have argued that a prolonged absence from home by a spouse is neglect of the other spouse. For instance, church administrators and businesspeople may have to travel extensively. Some Adventists have claimed that such activity is to be regarded as abandonment or neglect and would be considered grounds for divorce. Again, allowing neglect to be grounds for divorce is very tricky, difficult to define, open for abuse, and biblically problematic to justify, to say the least.

*Regarding the second question:* The issue is the definition of violence and the difficulty to rule from which point onward (extent, frequency, etc.) a divorce would be justified. A paper suggests that “moderate violence” that is repented of should not lead to a divorce. But what is “moderate violence”? If a husband slaps his wife once, some Adventists have understood that as grounds for divorce and have gotten a divorce despite a request of forgiveness. Others have forgiven the aggression and continued their marriage. If a wife bites, pinches or scratches her husband, is this behavior grounds for divorce? How far should tolerance of violence (see Matt 5: 38-48) and/or forgiveness go (see Matt 18:21-35 which precedes the passage on divorce in Matt 19 and forms its context)? The problem is that levels of violence are very difficult to define. It becomes even more demanding when we notice that talk about physical violence must also include discussion of psychological, emotional, and verbal violence because one often triggers the other,<sup>22</sup> and in many cases, both spouses may engage in forms of violence so that the matter escalates, and marriage is endangered. A marriage getting sour is seldom the problem of only one spouse. For psychological violence see, e.g., the sayings about the quarrelsome woman/wife in Proverbs 10:13; 21:9; 25:24; and 27:15-16 (although divorce is not implied in these passages). In addition, remarriage does not always solve the problem. Women who are attracted to a violent partner often find a similar partner for a second marriage.

With the inclusion of violence—physical and/or psychological—and neglect as grounds for divorce, almost any marriage would have grounds for divorce. It would be quite easy to accuse the partner of one of the two problems and thereby have an easy way out of an uncomfortable situation. This is not to say that there are not extreme cases in which separation could be an option (1 Cor 7:10-11).<sup>23</sup> We condemn any form of violence in marriage and outside of marriage and the church must do whatever possible to help those suffering from it. But we would suggest that in His wisdom Jesus did not make neglect or violence grounds for divorce because both are prone to be abused. Exceptions cannot become the rule. Furthermore, we cannot assume that violence in marriage did not occur in the Ancient Near East. Jesus must have been aware of it. Yet, He did not address it when asked about grounds for divorce. Jesus’s sayings on divorce are better understood as absolute sayings that surpass human attempts to fix a problem.

Finally, one does not need to change the biblical theology of marriage to deal with difficult cases in a caring way. There are several cases in which Ellen G. White had to deal with divorce. What can be learned from her is that in some cases an easy fix was not possible, and we may have to leave the involved spouses alone in the sense that we cannot regulate all cases. But E. G. White clearly supported Scripture by stating: “Nothing but the violation of the marriage bed can either break or annul the marriage vow...Men are not at liberty to make a standard of law for themselves, to avoid God’s law and please their own inclination. They must come to God’s great moral standard of righteousness...God gave only one cause why a wife should leave her husband, or the husband leave his wife, which was adultery” (AH 341-342). If we attempt “to update” Scripture, we are indirectly claiming that the Bible is not sufficient and God has not foreseen the future, including our current era, or is not speaking to us today through His Word. Furthermore, if we change, add to, or take

away from Scripture (Rev 22:18-19) as in the case of divorce, why should we not do it also in other cases? Why would we keep, for instance, Sabbath instead of Sunday, still practice foot washing, and still be opposed to the sexual revolution in its various forms (e.g., incest, orgies, prostitution, adultery)? But if we decide to do that, we make ourselves lords over the Word of God, replace Jesus as the Master with ourselves, and may change anything that comes to mind.

## CONCLUSION

Sexuality gone wrong is a difficult issue and typically causes much pain for those involved. Jesus is compassionate and cares for all His suffering children. He also upholds the importance of marriage as a divine gift which can bring with it many blessings. So must we do. Human hardness of heart and depravity are not to overrule God's ideal. The divine plan regarding sexuality and marriage is very good and must be supported. However, so must also be those who suffer from the problem of sin. The Lord of the resurrection can forgive sins, revive dying marriages, and give hope to the afflicted.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> <https://www.spiegel.de/partnerschaft/tantra-lehrerin-gibt-tipps-jede-gesunde-frau-verkraeftet-fuenf-liebhaber-a-92cf4ef7-502a-4560-8c10-f3bc6d605dce> (accessed and translated 4/19/2024).
- <sup>2</sup> <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/die-zukunft-des-sex-a-630cb4c2-9506-4ba0-bd93-75c8848cb3c5> (accessed and translated 4/21/2024).
- <sup>3</sup> David P. Barash, "Polygamy in Humans," in *Encyclopedia of Evolutionary Psychological Science*, 2021, edited by Todd K Shackelford and Viviana A Weekes-Shackelford (Cham/Switzerland: Springer, 2021): 6045.
- <sup>4</sup> <https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/kino/drei-regisseur-tom-tykwer-letztlich-ist-monogamie-widernatuerlich-a-735277.html> (accessed and translated 4/21/2024).
- <sup>5</sup> Joe Kort, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/understanding-the-erotic-code/201809/mono-gamy-it-s-not-what-you-think> (accesses 4/21/2024).
- <sup>6</sup> See Alberto R. Timm, "The Impact of Great Revolutions on Marriage and Family," in *Family with Contemporary Issues on Marriage and Parenting*. Biblical Research Institute Studies in Biblical Ethics, Volume 3; edited by Ekkehardt Mueller and Elias Brasil de Souza (Silver Spring: Biblical Research Institute, 2023), 632-638.
- <sup>7</sup> Mentioned by Kort: "Another man in the group looked at him and asked, 'How could you be against polygamy? You've divorced three wives and are looking for a fourth!'"
- <sup>8</sup> Zoltán Szalos-Farkas, "Spirituality of Human Sexuality: A Theological and Anthropological Perspective" in *Marriage: Biblical and Theological Aspects*, Biblical Research Institute Studies in Biblical Ethics, Volume 1, edited by Ekkehardt Mueller and Elias Brasil de Souza (Silver Spring: Biblical Research Institute, 2015), 123-141.
- <sup>9</sup> Thomas Domanyi, "Sexuality and Marriage from a Theological Perspective," *Marriage: Biblical and Theological Aspects*, 103.
- <sup>10</sup> They do not only affect the persons involved in the act but also children, parents, the extended family, the church, and even society and nations. In addition, we must leave it to God how He evaluates sins.
- <sup>11</sup> If used symbolically it refers to the relation of humanity with God which is jeopardized by idolatry (Jer 3:9).
- <sup>12</sup> For a study of the term see Ekkehardt Mueller, "Porneia: Sexual Immorality" in *Sexuality: Contemporary Issues from a Biblical Perspective*, Biblical Research Institute Studies in Biblical Ethics, Volume 2, edited by Ekkehardt Mueller and Elias Brasil de Souza (Silver Spring: Biblical Research Institute, 2022), 17-31.
- <sup>13</sup> See *Sexuality: Contemporary Issues from a Biblical Perspective and Family with Contemporary Issues on Marriage and Parenting*.
- <sup>14</sup> Kathy McCoy, "7 Important Truths About Divorce After a Long Marriage," *Psychology Today* (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/complicated-love/201809/7-important-truths-about-divorce-after-a-long-marriage> [accessed 4/22/2024]).
- <sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, some claim that the Hebrew phrase 'erwat dābār (a matter of indecency) corresponds with the Greek porneia (sexual immorality including adultery etc.). However, the LXX (the Greek translation of the OT) translates the phrase 'erwat dābār with

the phrase *aschēmon pragma*, “a shameful thing.” This indicates that the Jewish translators of the LXX did not think that the Hebrew terminology referred to *porneia* (sexual immorality including adultery). That Jesus does not use the wording of the LXX in the exception clause is an indication that He went beyond indecency in Deuteronomy 24:1 and meant sexual immorality.

- <sup>16</sup> Mark 10:12 does not only mention the male initiative but also the female for getting a divorce.
- <sup>17</sup> See <https://www.adventist.org/official-statements/ending-violence-against-women-and-girls/>, <https://www.adventist.org/official-statements/well-being-and-value-of-children/>, <https://www.adventist.org/official-statements/child-sexual-abuse/>, <https://www.adventist.org/official-statements/family-violence/>, <https://www.adventist.org/official-statements/statement-on-abuse-and-family-violence/> (accessed 4/23.2024).
- <sup>18</sup> See Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament*. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 192-193.
- <sup>19</sup> This is also so in 1 Timothy 5:8. Exodus 21:7-11, although a passage on slavery, has been applied by some to argue for neglect and violence in marriage and consequently for divorce. This is not legitimate. The passage does not deal with divorce and is casuistic law, relating to a specific situation in Israel. According to R. Davidson, 191-193, the text does not support polygamy and the slave girl should not be understood as a wife. But she has a right to food, clothing, and a third item. The Hebrew term, often translated as “marriage rights,” is a hapax legomenon (a term occurring only once in Scripture) and hardly means conjugal rights but may refer to shelter.
- <sup>20</sup> To call a church member an unbeliever, if he/she sins in certain ways, and conclude that a divorce is therefore legitimate is also a difficult issue. Like other biblical characters David would easily qualify as such due to his premeditated adultery and murder. Believers are still sinners in various ways. We better leave such a judgment to God unless the process of Matthew 18:15-18 is carried through, and repentance is not achieved. But even if the church member were an unbeliever, the initiative for a divorce would still be with that person.
- <sup>21</sup> For a discussion of the differences in Jesus’ sayings about divorce—some with exception clause and others without such a pronouncement—see Ekkehardt Mueller, “Divorce and Remarriage in the New Testament,” in *Marriage: Biblical and Theological Aspects*, Biblical Research Institute Studies in Biblical Ethics, Volume 1, edited by Ekkehardt Mueller and Elias Brasil de Souza (Silver Spring: Biblical Research Institute, 2015), 203-247.
- <sup>22</sup> The conflict between Goliath (verbal violence) and David (physical violence) is interesting.
- <sup>23</sup> See the Church Manual.

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# EXPLORING JESUS' CREATIVE POWER

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BY SVEN ÖSTRING

The intellectual ground held by both those who believe in biblical Creation and those who believe in atheistic evolution is certainly a space fraught with dangers for ministers like you and me.

Some of us ministers, being trained theologically, do not feel well-equipped to address fascinating yet complex scientific topics like the genetic code, phylogenetic trees, and paleontological evidence. When faced with such difficult issues, we may fall back on just teaching people the basic gospel message. Others of us may recognize the need to address the area of Creation but run unprepared into the fray. Sometimes, we create more chaos than clarity. The question is, Is there an effective way to disciple people regarding Creation?

## THE IMPORTANCE OF ADDRESSING CREATION

It is important to discuss Creation for several reasons. First, researcher David Kinnaman has identified that a significant number of millennials leave the church because they feel that our congregations are shallow, anti-science, and not a place that allows for the expression of any doubt.<sup>1</sup> His research demonstrates that avoiding the topic of Creation is not an effective discipleship strategy.

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Second, the beliefs that we hold regarding our origins affect our picture of God and, consequently, our relationship with Him. For example, a minister may feel that it is intellectually necessary to fully integrate biblical Creation with evolution, which will result in the position known as theistic evolution. The negative impact of theistic evolution, though, is that it cultivates the view that God restricts Himself to following the natural laws that we normally observe in nature. Over time, such a view can subconsciously diminish our confidence and awareness that God can perform supernatural miracles in our lives.

## CLEARING UP SOME MISCONCEPTIONS

To begin with, it is worthwhile to clear up some misconceptions. First, there is a belief that science and Christianity are fundamentally in conflict. However, this is an unfortunate misunderstanding. Science starts from the position that the universe has an orderly structure that our rational human minds can understand. Since God is the intelligent Designer of both the structure of the universe and our minds, He provides the rational foundation that science needs to be successful. That means that science and Christianity are not fundamentally in conflict.<sup>2</sup>

Second, many people believe that the critical issue is scientific evidence. Evolutionists will point to what they believe is a growing mountain of scientific data that supports evolution. Creationists, on the other hand, will offer scientific evidence that they claim indicates a recent Creation. However, the real issue is not primarily scientific evidence<sup>3</sup> because we are all dealing with the same physical data. Rather, the fundamental issue, therefore, in the dialogue between Creation and evolution is about the nature and existence of God and the way He acts in the universe. It is important to recognize that we are dealing with theological issues, not scientific ones. This means that, as ministers with theological training, we are actually well-equipped to address fundamental concerns.

## PRACTICAL STEPS TO EFFECTIVE DISCIPLESHIP ON CREATION

Let's now turn to seven practical steps that we can take to effectively disciple people in our congregations with respect to Creation.

### PERSONAL, SPIRIT-LED SHAPING

First of all, we need to allow the Holy Spirit to shape us personally in this area so that we are prepared to disciple others into a deeper understanding of God and His work of Creation. Therefore,

**Step 1:** Pray for grace-based knowledge and wisdom. It is very easy to charge into conversations about Creation and evolution relying on our rationality and wisdom. However, like Daniel and his three friends, we need to ask God to give us knowledge and wisdom in this area. Because we all have limited understanding and fallible rationality, we can easily misinterpret the evidence. Seeking God's grace and wisdom opens to us the opportunity for us to receive greater, divine knowledge on this important topic.<sup>4</sup>

**Step 2:** Develop a Word-shaped worldview. As ministers, we need a worldview shaped by the Word of God. We must spend time reflecting on the Creation account found in Genesis 1 and 2 and other biblical passages such as Psalm 104, Proverbs 8, and John 1. Reflect on what these passages tell us about the nature of Jesus as our Creator, and then permit the Holy Spirit to use His inspired Scriptures to mold your worldview.

**Step 3:** Identify and evaluate your personal origins position. Basically, interpretations regarding the origins of the universe, our planet, and life on our planet fall into five categories: (1) theistic evolution, (2) progressive creationism, (3) young life on Earth, (4) young human cosmos, and (5) young universe.

Learn more about each position, and identify which one you currently hold. It also is important to evaluate your position and let the Holy Spirit guide you toward a position that is possibly more consistent with the Bible.<sup>5</sup>

### GRACE-BASED ENGAGEMENT

It is now time for us to step outside of the quiet reflection of our pastoral offices to engage in Creation discipleship within our congregations and community. Therefore,

**Step 4:** Listen with respect and care. Because we live in a world filled with a wide spectrum of beliefs and positions regarding our origins, we need to view people in our pastoral care and within our circle of influence the way that Jesus would. No matter what people's views were, He valued and welcomed them as beings made in the image of God. Jesus listened to them in order to understand their interests and questions. Irrespective of their concerns or their position on Creation, most people want to know the truth.<sup>6</sup>

However, Jesus did not just leave people where they were. As author Max Lucado has pointed out, "God loves you just the way you are, but he refuses to leave you that way. He wants you to be just like Jesus."<sup>7</sup> That includes Jesus' knowledge and understanding of Creation. This insight is supported by author Ellen G. White: "In every human being He discerned infinite possibilities. He saw [people] as they might be, transfigured by His grace."<sup>8</sup>

### COURAGEOUS LEADERSHIP ON CREATION

There comes a point at which we need to directly engage with the Creation issues themselves. But we should do so only as we are personally being led by the Spirit. Therefore,

**Step 5:** Lead your members in prayer and study of Scripture. Since the Holy Spirit can guide your church members into truth, it is important to lead them to pray about the issues at stake. This cultivates the spiritual attitudes of humility and teachability. It is also important to encourage them to study relevant passages in Scripture to learn more about God and His work of Creation.

You may wonder why we would commence with prayer and the study of Scripture rather than start with the scientific issues. Jesus told His disciples, " 'When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth' " (John 16:13, ESV) and prayed to His Father, " 'Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth' " (John 17:17, ESV). White confirms the significance of this: "It is through

false theories and traditions that Satan gains his power over the mind. By directing [people] to false standards, he misshapes the character. Through the Scriptures the Holy Spirit speaks to the mind, and impresses truth upon the heart. Thus He exposes error, and expels it from the soul. It is by the Spirit of truth, working through the word of God, that Christ subdues His chosen people to Himself.”<sup>9</sup>

Here, we see the spiritual importance of allowing the Holy Spirit and Scripture to shape our understanding of Creation with respect to our spiritual growth and sanctification.

**Step 6:** Engage with scientific issues. As pastors, we can address the scientific issues in one-on-one conversations, in small group settings, and as a congregation in discussions on topical issues. You may facilitate such open discussions, or you may invite Bible-believing experts to speak on topics of interest to your church members and congregations.

Perhaps you may wonder where such discussions will lead. As you facilitate these conversations, you need to keep a few things in mind:

1. Nature contains significant evidence of intelligent design, including the fine-tuning of the universe, the genetic information found in all of our cells, and the irreducible complexity of living cells.
2. All scientific theories and conclusions rest on assumptions. It is important to dig deep and identify what they are. Often, implicit theological assumptions are being made, such as the way God interacts with the world, which may need to be questioned and even challenged.
3. Certain scientific evidence points toward a recent creation of life on Earth and even of our planet itself. It is valuable to explore such data.<sup>10</sup>

Keep in mind that you are not alone in this journey. Ask for the Holy Spirit to guide you as you lead out in the discussions.

**Step 7:** Provide courageous leadership. Finally, you need to provide courageous leadership on Creation. Being a leader means that you are aware that you may not know everything and that people have differing positions regarding Creation. Amid all those positions, though, God is calling you to lead people toward the truth while also respecting their freedom to choose what they believe. You can provide such leadership in two ways.

First, you can be courageous and honest about your position. My position on Creation is that God recently created our cosmos.<sup>11</sup> In the same way, you can provide leadership by sharing your viewpoint.

Second, you can direct people in your congregation to your denominational stand on Creation. For example, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has summarized its position in its fundamental belief #6, “Creation.”<sup>12</sup>

Leadership does not mean that you try to coerce or force people to believe what you might believe. It means being courageous and honest about what you and your denomination believe the Bible is teaching. Leading people to worship Jesus as Creator is what the Bible is calling us to do: “And he said with a loud voice, ‘Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water’ ” (Rev. 14:7, ESV).

## CONCLUSION

God is our Creator, and we are made in His image—this is our most fundamental relationship with Him. While the topic of Creation may be daunting at times, it is an exciting and spiritually fulfilling area to explore. Take courage in the fact that the Holy Spirit will guide you as you disciple people into a deeper understanding of Jesus’ creative work and power.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016). While gender and sexuality are major issues for young people in Gen Z, they also feel uneasy about the relationship between science and the Bible. Barna Group, *Gen Z: The Culture, Beliefs, and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation* (Ventura, CA: Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute, 2018), 64, 65.
- <sup>2</sup> Alvin Plantinga has pointed this out in his book *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- <sup>3</sup> As J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig have noted regarding the positions of theistic evolution, progressive creationism, and young earth creationism: “Thus the dialogue among these groups is not merely one about scientific fact. It never has been, because beginning with Darwin himself, the creation-evolution controversy has significantly been a debate about philosophy of science: Should theology directly interact and enter into the very fabric of science or should science adopt methodological naturalism?” J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017), 377.
- <sup>4</sup> Refer to Rebekah Miles’s chapter, “The Instrumental Role of Reason,” in W. Stephen Gunter, Scott J. Jones, Ted A. Campbell, Rebekah L. Miles, and Randy L. Maddox, *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), 77–106.
- <sup>5</sup> A number of books and resources can help you evaluate the various positions, such as J. P. Moreland and John Mark Reynolds, *Three Views on Creation and Evolution*, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), Richard Davidson, “The Genesis Account of Origins,” in *The Genesis Creation Account and Its Reverberations in the Old Testament*, ed. Gerald A. Klingbeil (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2015), J. P. Moreland, Stephen C. Meyer, Christopher Shaw, Ann K. Gauger, and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Theistic Evolution: A Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Critique* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017).
- <sup>6</sup> Ben Clausen provides a good personal testimony of building relationships with people in the scientific community: Ben Clausen, “Making Friends in the Scientific Community,” *Adventist Review*, May 2021, <https://adventistreview.org/magazine-article/2105-24/>.
- <sup>7</sup> Max Lucado, *Just Like Jesus* (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 1998), 3, 173.
- <sup>8</sup> Ellen G. White, *Education* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2002), 80.
- <sup>9</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 671.
- <sup>10</sup> Good websites that you can refer to include the Geoscience Research Institute (<https://www.grisda.org/>), Creation Ministries International (<https://creation.com>), and Answers in Genesis (<https://answersingenesis.org>).
- <sup>11</sup> You can explore my personal exegesis of Genesis 1:1–3 in Sven Östring, “Our Miraculous Planet Earth,” *Ministry*, December 2018, <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2018/12/Our-miraculous-planet-Earth>, and Sven Östring, “An Apologia for an Earlier Commencement for Day 1 of Creation: A Structural Analysis Based on a Work Correspondence,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 59, no. 1 (2021), <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/auss/vol59/iss1/1/>.
- <sup>12</sup> Refer to the web page “What Adventists Believe About Creation,” General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, accessed June 16, 2024, <https://www.adventist.org/creation/>. A fuller exposition of the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of Creation can be found in General Conference Ministerial Association, “Creation,” in *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: An Exposition of the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2018), 79–89.

# INTEGRATING *BACK TO THE ALTAR* WITH *ALIVE IN JESUS*

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BY SVEN ÖSTRING

## THE TEXT

Deuteronomy 6:6-9

One of the key features of the Bible is its integrated and holistic view of the world. Because we, as Seventh-day Adventists, are committed to aligning our worldview with the Bible, this integrated and holistic view forms one of the key pillars of the Adventist worldview.

This integration view starkly contrasts the dualistic approach that we naturally tend to drift towards as sinful human beings. The Greek philosophers excelled at this. They viewed our human souls as good and eternal, while our physical bodies were bad and something to be discarded as soon as possible. Throughout history, our natural tendency towards dualism can be observed in how we segment our lives into sacred time on the Sabbath and secular time during the rest of the week. According to this logic, if we have dedicated the Sabbath to God, then the rest of the week is ours to pursue the secular goals we want to achieve. Our dualistic and fragmented approach to life also manifests itself when we work and minister in silos, pushing our own agendas and bandwagons rather than working in an integrated and collaborative way.

As Adventists, we pride ourselves on noting that we hold to an integrated and holistic view of human nature. However, the theological roots for unity and integration go much deeper. It finds it in the very nature of God Himself. It takes us back to God's revelation of Himself to Moses.

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## THE THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF INTEGRATION

We find the true foundations of integration in Moses' teaching for the Israelites when he stated:

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4).

There is a deep unity and integration in the very nature of God, a fundamental unity within the diversity of three co-eternal Persons. Moses uses this truth to ground the reality of our integrated and wholistic nature:

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:5).

God does not want just one aspect of our being, say our emotions (heart), our intellectual beliefs (mind), or our work (our strength). He wants us to dedicate every aspect of ourselves to Him because He knows that it is unsustainable to fragment our lives and the focus in our lives. Such fragmentation is a recipe for ultimately being torn apart and failing.

It is fascinating to observe that these verses, which lay the foundation for unity and integration in the very nature of God and our own human nature, provide us with the context for one of the most important passages on family ministry:

“And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:6–9).

God's vision is for us to live spiritually integrated family lives, to integrate His words into every aspect of our families, and not just be focused on spiritual things at church on Sabbath.

As leaders within the church, we need to apply God's vision of integration into our ministry and identify ways in which we can integrate our discipleship initiatives and programs to maximize our effectiveness for the kingdom of God.

## INTEGRATING THE BACK TO THE ALTAR WITH THE ALIVE IN JESUS

An excellent opportunity for discipleship and ministry integration identified within the South Pacific is the opportunity to integrate the Back to the Altar initiative with the new Alive in Jesus Sabbath School curriculum. The Back to the Altar initiative identifies the need for Seventh-day Adventist disciples and families to return to both personal and family worship in the context of discipleship and

mission. The Alive in Jesus Sabbath School curriculum has been developed by the General Conference Sabbath School and Personal Ministries department to provide an updated curriculum for discipling children that integrates best educational practice with Bible narrative and truth. In order to highlight the opportunity and value of integrating these two disciple-making initiatives, let us consider them separately.

## THE BACK TO THE ALTAR INITIATIVE

The Seventh-day Adventist movement has been statistically tracking the level of personal and family worship and engagement with discipleship amongst its members and churches. This is because the Adventist movement understands that Jesus has given a mission to make disciples (Matthew 28:18–20) and calls people to worship Him as Creator (Revelation 14:6,7).

While historically, Adventists have been known as people of the Book, due to their comprehensive understanding of the Bible, the Adventist church has identified concerning trends amongst its members and churches. These include a reduction in the commitment and frequency of personal Bible study and devotion amongst its members, as well as a reduction in the commitment and frequency of family worship within Adventist homes. This reduction in personal and family worship results in a drop in spirituality efficacy and Biblical understanding. Instead of loving the LORD our God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, we only commit a percentage of ourselves to worship Him, and we often do it in an unbalanced, lopsided way.

We are not alone in getting distracted from our primary focus of loving God. The people of Israel also became distracted and spiritually divided in their focus. They felt the cultural pull to worshipping the Canaanite gods of Baal and Ashteroth. It is important to note that they did not abandon worshipping Yahweh totally. Instead, they were living spiritually fragmented lives, attempting to worship three different gods simultaneously. They were not giving wholistic and integrated worship to Yahweh alone, as Moses had called them to do.

This divided worship focus was literally ripping the spiritual fabric of their lives apart. It was reflected in the reduction of their spiritual potency and soon to be in the natural world in the form of a devastating drought. God sent Elijah to warn Ahab and his spiritually distracted and divided subjects of the impending concerns (1 Kings 17:1). A threat and fulfillment sent Ahab into an irrational rage and frenzy.

However, God's focus is not primarily on the spiritual and natural consequences of our divided focus. God's heart and desire is for our salvation, redemption, and reconciliation (Ezekiel 18:23, 2 Corinthians 5:18–21, 1 Timothy 2:4). Thus, God sent Elijah again to call His people to be whole-heartedly committed to worshipping Him. The worship showdown on Mount Carmel unmistakably demonstrated who really was God.

Moses and Elijah shared this important prophetic role. Both Biblical leaders demonstrated the power of God in contrast to the gods of their time. Both leaders made clarion calls to the people of Israel to wholeheartedly worship God. However, there is another important similarity. Both

Moses and Elijah championed a message of bringing families together in the context of worship and spirituality (Deuteronomy 6:6–9 and Malachi 5:5,6).

The Seventh-day Adventist movement understands that God has given us corporately the prophetic mantle of Elijah. We are to announce the arrival of God’s judgment and call people to worship God as Creator (Revelation 14:6,7), but our role is also to facilitate family reconciliation and call families back to worship.

This is the Biblical background and mandate for the Back to the Altar initiative. It has been developed to revive personal and family worship. The Back to the Altar initiative (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2024) has the vision that there is a:

*A daily place for God in every heart and every home*

It also has the goal of equipping Adventist church members in the following way (MacLafferty & Mason, 2023):

*How to live daily as a disciple of Jesus*

To make this vision become a reality and fulfill this goal, the Back to the Altar initiative seeks to embed seven principles in the lives of church members (MacLafferty & Mason, 2023):

1. **Come to Jesus as you are:** We all need to know that we can come just as we are to Jesus. Jesus’ invitation to each one of us is:

“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light” (Matthew 11:28,29).

This does not just apply to church members who are physically weary from a heavy work week. It also applies to people who are heavily laden with the spiritual burden of sin. Jesus invites all of us to come to Him. Discipleship and worship start from this grace-oriented gospel foundation.

2. **Honor Jesus as Lord:** Once we have come to Jesus just as we are, we must allow Jesus to be Lord of our lives. The Biblical truth is that ultimately, everyone will acknowledge the lordship of Jesus:

“Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9–11).



By honoring Jesus as Lord every day, we trust Him to accomplish the transformation that He has planned for our lives.

- 3. Discover Jesus in His word and in prayer:** We have the earliest and clearest apostolic picture of Jesus in the canonical Scriptures. Through this picture, God has given us the Scriptures as a powerful discipleship to shape and mold our lives:

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16).

“For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

We need to discover Jesus daily in His word and in prayer.

- 4. Receive a fresh baptism of the Holy Spirit:** Jesus promised us the gift and ministry of the Holy Spirit. However, the baptism of the Holy Spirit is not just a once-off event. We need a fresh baptism of the Holy Spirit every day. This was the supernatural key to Jesus’ effectiveness in ministry:

“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me,  
Because the LORD has anointed Me  
To preach good tidings to the poor;  
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,  
To proclaim liberty to the captives,  
And the opening of the prison to those who are bound” (Isaiah 61:1).

We are given this prophetic counsel in the Spirit of Prophecy (Acts of the Apostles, p. 50): For the daily baptism of the Spirit every worker should offer his petition to God.... The presence of the Spirit with God’s workers will give the proclamation of truth a power that not all the honor or glory of the world could give.

Our lives will demonstrate apostolic, Pentecostal power if we receive a fresh baptism of the Holy Spirit daily.

- 5. Love your family sacrificially:** This is Moses and Elijah’s prophetic vision and counsel. As the angel prophesied to Zechariah:

“He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, ‘to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,’ and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17).

Truly loving your family means being willing to sacrifice your own personal dreams, aspirations, and independence to meet their needs. It involves focusing on their discipleship and leading to worship. However, the spiritual investment has eternal significance and value.

**6. Disciple others to Jesus:** Jesus’ commission to us to disciple others is very clear:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen” (Matthew 28:19,20).

This commission is grounded in the unity within the Godhead, and a holistic focus in life is profound and connects strongly with Moses’ call to worship in Deuteronomy 6.

**7. Live your God-given mission:** Jesus stated clearly that His calling was to serve. Our calling to follow Jesus involves serving others through our spiritual gifts:

“But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all (1 Corinthians 12:7).

The Bible illustrates how the Holy Spirit integrates this service using the analogy of the body.

This survey of the Back to the Altar principles demonstrates that the initiative is Biblical, comprehensive, and based on Jesus’ own example.

## THE ALIVE IN JESUS SABBATH SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Sabbath School is one of the key discipleship processes within the Seventh-day Adventist movement, which includes the discipleship of our children and teenagers. The current GraceLink curriculum was originally launched over 20 years ago and has provided Sabbath School teachers with resources for children aged between 0 and 12 years (Evans, 2002; General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2016). Due to the need to increase Biblical literacy and strengthen the disciple-making process for children, the global Seventh-day Adventist church has recognized the need to develop a new Sabbath School curriculum for children. This curriculum incorporates research into stages of faith development with best education practices and has increased the discipleship scope

for children between 0 and 18 years (Sabbath School and Personal Ministries Department, 2024).

The foundation of the Alive in Jesus curriculum is the Bible. Jesus Himself illustrated the foundational nature of His teachings in His well-known parable:

“Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock” (Matthew 7:24,25).

This also follows the explicit insight and counsel of Ellen White (1977, p. 89):

“The Word of God is to be the foundation of all study, and the words of revelation, carefully studied, appeal to and strengthen the intellect as well as the heart.”

The curriculum aims to lead children to develop a clear Seventh-day Adventist worldview with its 28 fundamental beliefs.

The Alive in Jesus curriculum is based on three pillars:

1. **Grace:** Paul teaches us in Ephesians that we can become alive in Jesus because of the grace of God:

“But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)” (Ephesians 2:4,5).

Children need to know that Jesus loves them and that He offers grace to everyone who comes to Him.

2. **Character Development:** Jesus promised that, as we abide in Him, He will develop our lives and characters so that we can bear more fruit:

“I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit” (John 15:1,2).

This vision for spiritual growth and character development embraces the children in our families and our church.

3. **Mission:** Once we have experienced the love of Jesus and are abiding in Him, we want to share His love with others. As David said,

“Restore to me the joy of Your salvation,  
 And uphold me by Your generous Spirit.  
 Then I will teach transgressors Your ways,  
 And sinners shall be converted to You” (Psalm 51:12,13).

This missional response flows from understanding the heart and mission of Jesus Himself.

### DISCIPLESHIP OVERLAP

Having summarised the principles of the Back to the Altar initiative and the pillars of the Alive in Jesus curriculum and their Biblical basis, it is now possible to identify how these initiatives overlap from a discipleship perspective. The table below identifies how each of the Alive in Jesus pillars can be matched with the Back to the Altar principles:

Back to the Altar Principles	Alive in Jesus Pillars
Come to Jesus as you are	Grace
Honor Jesus as Lord	Character Development
Discover Jesus in His word and in prayer	
Receive a fresh baptism of the Holy Spirit	
Love your family sacrificially	Mission
Disciple others to Jesus	
Live your God-given mission	

**Table 1:** How the primary Alive in Jesus pillars can be matched with the Back to the Altar principles.

With further theological reflection, it is possible to discern that there are even more ways to match these principles. For example, we receive the gift and baptism of the Holy Spirit because of God’s grace. Also, the principle of discovering Jesus in His word is strongly connected with the foundation of Alive in Jesus being the Bible. However, without trying to ignore these theological connections, for the sake of clarity and simplicity, we have highlighted the main ways that the Back to the Altar principles can be matched with the Alive in Jesus pillars.

The strong connection between the Back to the Altar principles and the Alive in Jesus pillars shows that both programs are based on the same underlying discipleship principles. It also reveals the opportunity of integrating these two discipleship programs and suggests that there is value in doing so.

## COMPLEMENTARY DISCIPLESHIP CONTRIBUTIONS

These initiatives can also complement each other by making distinct and valuable contributions to the discipleship process

The Back to the Altar principles provide a structured discipleship checklist that allows a parent or a child to run through daily to ensure they achieve all the elements of a comprehensive discipleship journey. It enables a parent to personally invest in integrated and holistic discipleship using a comprehensive structure, preparing them to disciplining their children. In this way, the Back to the Altar principles make explicit key discipleship principles that are embedded within other discipleship programs. For example, this includes focusing on receiving a fresh daily baptism of the Holy Spirit and disciplining others to Jesus.

The contribution of the Alive in Jesus curriculum is that it provides a structured journey through the Bible specifically developed for the faith development of children. Thus, it directly contributes to Back to the Altar principles of discovering Jesus in His word, loving your family sacrificially, and living your God-given mission. It resources family worship and the discipleship of children in an engaging way.

## PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INTEGRATING BACK TO THE ALTAR AND ALIVE IN JESUS

Based on the significant discipleship overlap as well as complementary features of both the Back to the Altar initiative and the Alive in Jesus Sabbath School curriculum, there are several practical recommendations that I would like to propose for families to integrate these discipleship programs effectively.

- 1. Structuring Parent's Personal Devotions:** The Back to the Altar principles can be used by parents to comprehensively structure their own personal devotions. This is an important way for parents to establish their own personal worship and to grow spiritually as disciples. It is also important to prepare for disciplining their children because we can only give what we have received ourselves. This is the discipleship sequence that Jesus identified for His disciples:

“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

- 2. Structuring Daily Family Worship:** Parents and children can also use the Back to the Altar principles to draw out key discipleship elements during daily family worship. The principles align with the Alive in Jesus foundation pillars; thus, both discipleship programs reinforce each other.

For example, parents can remind their families that they can come to Jesus just as they are. This reinforces that Jesus' grace extends to everyone in the family, no matter where we are currently at spiritually or what we have thought, said, or done throughout the day. Also, all the family members can ask for and receive a daily baptism of the Holy Spirit. In this way, children can begin spiritually preparing for their own public baptism by water and the Spirit.

Parents will need to balance the use of repetition in going through the Back to the Altar principles with identifying creative ways to illustrate the principles for their children. However, repetition is a valuable way of laying the foundation for a lifetime of discipleship and reinforcing these principles in the minds of their children.

- 3. A Structured Curriculum for Discovering Jesus in His Word:** Discovering Jesus in His Word lies at the heart of the Back of the Altar principles. This is where the Alive in Jesus curriculum can be integrated into family worship. The Alive in Jesus objectives mean that the curriculum contributes an engaging journey of Bible discovery and discipleship.

As parents go through the daily readings and activities in the Alive in Jesus study guides, it is valuable for them to highlight wherever the Alive in Jesus reading links with the Back to the Altar principles. This enables the principles to be drawn out in fresh and creative ways.

## DISCIPLESHIP RESOURCE RECOMMENDATIONS

The Alive in Jesus curriculum provides a wealth of discipleship resources for parents and children (Sabbath School and Personal Ministries Department, 2024). I strongly recommend that Children's Ministry Directors at every administrative level of the church encourage parents to invest in these resources for their families as much as possible within their budget.

Altar webpage provides The Way Back to the Altar training workbook, which leads participants through the Biblical and Spirit of Prophecy on which the initiative is based. This can be used for initial training in the Back to the Altar principles. To facilitate the daily application of the Back to the Altar principles, I recommend that Personal Ministries and Children's Ministry Directors in the local Mission and Conferences produce and distribute Back to the Altar bookmarks that provide a checklist of the principles for quick reference. Families can use these bookmarks to either mark their place in their Bibles or Alive in Jesus study guides.

## CONCLUSION

Jesus has given the Seventh-day Adventist church the commission to make disciples in the context of the Three Angels' Messages. Within this commission is the call to develop an integrated, holistic approach to making disciples who worship God as their Creator with their whole being. We can come back to our own personal and family altars and become alive in Jesus. Integrating the Back to the Altar initiative and Alive in Jesus curriculum in our homes is valuable and essential to fulfilling the mission that Jesus has given us.

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# MARRIAGE AND FAMILY: BIBLICAL AND SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

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BY BOUBAKAR SANOU

Marriage finds its origins in God's creative plan and purpose for humanity. As a divine gift to humanity, marriage exists in diverse forms in societies around the world. This chapter examines Genesis 1-3 to highlight God's original intention for marriage and subsequently explores how societal norms shape the perception and practice of marriage. The objective is to emphasize that despite societal trends and shifting influences, God's fundamental purpose for marriage offers a steadfast compass to couples seeking to build healthy, fulfilling, and God-honoring relationships.

## MARRIAGE: THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

The account of Creation in Genesis 1-3 is central to a biblical understanding of marriage. Genesis 1:26-28 states that God created humankind in His image as male and female, blessed them and commanded them to be fruitful and multiply, to fill and subdue the earth. This text highlights three important things about marriage. First, the marriage institution exists as a pre-Fall design of God, in which human sexuality in the context of the biblical framework for marriage is a divine arrangement. Second, Adam and Eve's creation in God's image confers to each of them equal status within the marital relationship regardless of their physical differences. Third, because the command to fill the earth requires conceiving children, it indicates that God strictly designed marriage for heterosexual relationships, making the sexual distinction between male and female fundamental

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to what God intends marriage to be. However, it is important to note that while procreation is emphasized in this passage, marriage is not solely about childbearing. Childless couples can still have a valid and fulfilling union in God's eyes (Walton, 2001, p. 187; Clark, 1995, p. 29).

Genesis 2:18 introduces a second important fact about marriage: the creation of a *suitable helper* (*'ezer kēnegdô*) for Adam. The word “helper” (*'ezer*) is most often used for God's act of deliverance (e.g., Exodus 18:4b; Deuteronomy 33:7; 29a; Psalm 33:20; 115:9-11; 121:1-2; 124:8; 146:5) (Walton, 2001, p. 176; Doukhan, 2014, p. 80). The additional term “*kēnegdô*” (equivalent, counterpart) clarifies the nature of this help. It suggests a position of equality, someone who corresponds to Adam, his “vis-à-vis” or “counterpart” (Badenas, 2015, p. 77). It emphasizes Eve's importance as an indispensable partner in fulfilling all the stewardship responsibilities God delegated to them, not subordination to Adam. Both were created in God's image, making their shared humanity more important than their differing sexes. The focus is on their fundamental equality, companionship, and mutual support. As both Adam and Eve were fully and equally made in the image of God, they were created to rule over the rest of creation rather than over each other (Allender and Longman, 1995, p. 20). An appropriate way to describe this pre-Fall symbiotic relationship would be to say that “Eve was created from a rib taken from the side of Adam, signifying that she was not to control him as the head, nor to be trampled under his feet as an inferior, but to stand by his side as an equal, to be loved and protected by him” (White, 1890, p. 46).

Adam's exultation at the sight of Eve, his suitable helper, in Genesis 2:23, as opposed to when animals were introduced to him in Genesis 2:20b, has important implications for mate selection. It communicates both his affirmation of the unique compatibility between him and her and his commitment to her. He acknowledges that Eve is the one who will meet his needs; the one who will make him complete. Adam's jubilant exclamation speaks not only about his free consent to the arrangement but also about his captivation with and love for Eve. It has been suggested that “just as this freedom was essential in the garden, so it is crucial in all succeeding sexual relationships” (Davidson, 2014, p. 43).

Genesis 2:24 offers another cornerstone for understanding marriage. It emphasizes three key principles that guide couples toward a strong and lasting union—leaving, clinging, and becoming one flesh. The act of “leaving” one's parents does not suggest complete separation but a shift in priorities, where the newly formed marital bond takes precedence. This establishes a sense of independence for the spouses, allowing them to build their own family identity. Importantly, this “leaving” also involves a public declaration of the marriage covenant, witnessed by family and signifying the broader social and communal dimensions of marriage (Hasel, 2015, p. 30; Davidson, 2007, pp. 43, 44).

The emphasis on “clinging” to one's wife underscores the importance of a strong and personal attachment between spouses. This attachment, described with a covenant term, reflects the permanent and exclusive nature of the marriage bond, replacing the previous attachment to parents (Doukhan, 2014, p. 85; Davidson, 2007, p. 45). Jesus Himself referenced this verse to affirm marriage as a permanent union, with exceptions for specific circumstances (e.g., Matt 19:9).

The concept of “becoming one flesh” signifies a harmonious union that encompasses physical, emotional, spiritual, and economic aspects of the couple’s lives. Mutual submission between husband and wife is crucial for achieving this harmony (see Ephesians 5:21). While Adam and Eve’s “one flesh” state was unique due to their creation, other couples achieve this oneness through intentional effort and dedication. The experience of becoming one flesh requires a commitment not just to each other but also to the relationship itself, to the institution of marriage, and ultimately to God, who established it. Supportive social systems are also essential elements for a thriving marriage (Balswick and Balswick, 2014, p. 90; Rock, 2000, p. 732; Lawler, 2007, pp. 9-10).

The account of Genesis 3 is a post-Fall account. Part of its focus (Gen 3:16b) is on the negative impact of sin on the marriage institution. Genesis 3:16b, “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you,” has often been interpreted to justify or advocate for the subordination of wives to their husbands. However, this was not part of God’s plan for marriage since the idea of the subordination of Eve to Adam was neither mentioned nor implied prior to sin (Doukhan 2014, p. 105; Davidson, 2007, p. 65). Therefore, rather than being prescriptive and normative, Genesis 3:16 “describes what will happen, not what ought to happen. . . . [The] ruling domination by husband over wife is not some divine pattern to implement, but a forecast of the negative consequences of sin” (Clark, 1995, p. 8). The Fall damaged the egalitarian and harmonious relationship that existed between Adam and Eve as part of God’s ideal for marriage. Thus, instead of imposing a condition on Adam and Eve, Genesis 3:16 describes a forthcoming new reality in their relationship as one of the inevitable consequences of their sin. However, with the substitutionary death of Jesus predicted in Genesis 3:15, the reversal of the fallen order of Creation has started its course. As a result, the outworking of divine grace and transformation can avert this tragedy to marriage through a gradual return to the pre-Fall egalitarian relationship between husband and wife (Wilkins, 2004, p. 644; Davidson, 2007, p. 76; Doukhan 2014, p. 105).

The concept of headship in the scriptural injunction, “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything” (Eph 5:22-24) and “I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God” (1 Cor 11:3) has been historically used to support and even justify male superiority in marriage. In light of Genesis 1:26-28 and 2:18-24, Ephesians 5:22-24 indicates male leadership rather than male superiority in marriage. Calvin Rock points out that “if there is to be found significance of function in Adam’s primacy in the Creation order, it is that of caretaker or servant. He was created first as forerunner or guardian of the being who would follow. . . . Leadership should be viewed not as a privileged superiority but as solemn, sacrificial responsibility” (2000, p. 733). Defending male superiority in marriage based on Ephesians 5:22-24 is also inconsistent with Ephesians 5:21, where Paul appeals to all the Ephesian believers to submit themselves “to one another in the fear of God.” The specific appeal of Ephesians 5:22-24 is that “the spirit that Christ manifests toward the church is the spirit that husband and wife are to manifest toward each other” (White, 1902, p. 46).

## SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON MARRIAGE

### COMMON TYPES OF MARRIAGE

Although the institution of marriage exists in some form in every human society, its practices, forms, and accompanying rituals vary from one context to another. There are typically three common types of marriage: civil marriage, church marriage, and customary marriage.

#### CIVIL MARRIAGE

A civil marriage is a legal contract between two partners, recognized and officiated by a government official in a non-religious ceremony. Since the government regulates civil marriage laws, it becomes a party to any marriage under its jurisdiction. Depending on the specific legislation, civil marriage ceremonies can be conducted for both monogamous, polygynous, polyandrous, heterosexual, or homosexual couples.

In light of the Creation account, homosexual, polygynous, and polyandrous marriages are not in conformity with God's design for marriage. Because God created only one woman, not several women or another man, as a suitable helper for Adam, Genesis 2:24 affirms heterosexual monogamy as God's design for marriage. Although, as a Church, we recognize civil marriage as an official form of marriage, we do not recognize forms of civil marriage that are opposed to scriptural principles regulating how marriage should be entered into. From the same perspective, the Church does not recognize a divorce pronounced by a government or a state if that pronouncement does not follow biblical principles (*The Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 2016, pp. 62, 157-160).

#### CHURCH MARRIAGE

A church marriage is a wedding ceremony led by a religious official authorized by the church to marry couples. In some countries, such a wedding is recognized by the state, eliminating the need for a separate civil ceremony. In other countries, church weddings are not legally recognized. In these cases, a civil ceremony is mandatory before the religious ceremony takes place. Although a civil marriage, at which a state representative endowed with legal authority officiates, is not prohibited by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, "it has been a historic tradition and a recommended practice of the church that Christian couples getting married have a church wedding" (Edwards, 1994, p. 22).

There are compelling biblical reasons for Adventist couples to opt for a church wedding. First, Genesis 1:26-28 and 2:18-24 establish marriage as a foundational paradigm within the order of Creation, emphasizing the covenantal nature of the union between the couple and God, reflecting the permanence and sacredness of their union. Second, choosing a religious service for marriage acknowledges the divine blessing necessary for a marriage to thrive. It signifies the couple's dependence on God as the author and sustainer of their union, claiming the blessings bestowed on Adam and Eve in Eden. Third, a church wedding expresses the couple's desire for the support and companionship of the church community as they embark on their marital journey. Lastly, a religious ceremony stands against the secularization of marriage, emphasizing its permanence and sacredness as a covenant ordained by God (Sanou, 2023, pp. 56-57).

## CUSTOMARY MARRIAGE

Customary marriage, often known as traditional marriage, refers to any marriage contracted according to the traditional marriage customs and laws of a people group. In traditional religious contexts, those customs and laws are believed to have been revealed to and handed down by their ancestors. These laws and customs dictate how marriages are contracted because following the footsteps of the ancestors is perceived not only as a privilege but, most importantly, as a mandate. It is therefore believed that society cannot fully experience wellbeing and fulfillment unless its members continue to learn and act upon what has been transmitted to and by the ancestors (Sanou, 2015, p. 16).

The relationship with the ancestors as understood in traditional religious contexts and the important role they occupy in customary marriage is problematic from an Adventist perspective, based on the biblical teachings concerning the state of human beings in death. As Adventists, we believe that “death is an unconscious state for all people” (*Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, 2018, p. 391). At death, the body and the spirit cease to exist until the resurrection of the dead at the Second Coming of Christ (1 Thess 4:16-17). Leviticus 19:28; 20:6, 27 and Deuteronomy 14:1-2; 18:10-13 speak against any practice involved with spiritism and ancestral worship. The same prohibition still applies to Christians of all eras and sociocultural and religious contexts. Therefore, faithfulness to biblical principles should never be overshadowed by any form of sensitivity to local traditions and religious practices that stand in conflict with the Word of God.

## CHOOSING A SPOUSE

The processes associated with mate selection vary significantly around the world. But broadly speaking, marriage partners are selected in two ways: choosing a life partner themselves—a love marriage; or their parents and larger kinship group choose for them—the arranged marriage (Rider and Ann Swallow, 2016; p. 118). Regarding how these two models of mate selection are viewed in different contexts, Kennon Rider and Ann Swallow note that

People who subscribe to the love marriage method of mate selection can often hardly fathom that arranged marriages could be happy or successful. Someone other than themselves choosing their partner may seem archaic, if not barbaric. Likewise, people from arranged marriage cultures often have difficulty believing that young people on their own could possibly select the best mate for themselves. Marital success, they would say, is too important to leave to chemistry. (2016; p. 120)

As a safeguard against any ethnocentric perspective, Christians should base their evaluation of other sociocultural marital practices on biblical principles alone. Although all human beings have

been shaped by the voices of their social locations, Christians have to acknowledge that the voice of the Bible supersedes all other contextual voices. It is essential to point out that both forms of mate selection are referenced in Scripture. The most prominent reference to a romantic relationship in the Bible is the Song of Songs, an entire book of the Bible dedicated explicitly to describing and celebrating love and romance in a marital relationship, proclaiming it as “not cheap, ugly, and evil but beautiful, wholesome, and praiseworthy” (Davidson 2007, p. 551). The book reaffirms the pre-Fall ideal of sexuality as a Creation order, heterosexual monogamous marriage as the biblically sanctioned marital form, equality of the sexes without hierarchy, marital sexuality and exclusivity, and marital permanence (Davidson, 2007, pp. 554-606; Provan, 2001, p. 247). Another noteworthy characteristic of the Song of Songs is the unusual way in which “it gives a central place to a woman’s voice unmediated by that of a narrator” (Murphy and Huwiler, 1999, p. 221). Because of the belief that the book depicts God’s ideal for human love, it has been proposed that the author of the Song of Songs wishes the type of love narrated in the book to be admired and imitated (Provan, 2001, pp. 235, 243). Even though stained by sin, romantic love continues to be a blessing from God.

Besides celebrating romantic love, the Song of Songs also has wisdom teachings on romance and marriage. That has important implications for love marriages. First, alongside the beauty of romantic love depicted in the book, mutual commitment is presented as the key to an enduring love relationship (8:6). As “a story of love redeemed” (Provan, 2001, p. 247), the romantic love encountered in the Song of Songs is far from being a distorted expression of love as a momentary sentimental experience. Second, romantic love is a sacred thing—it is entering into a covenant relationship and implies a lifelong commitment to one’s spouse. This is a rebuke to any humanly-constructed alternatives of sexual relationships. Third, the Song of Songs recognizes that physical intimacy must wait for the right time and the right person; otherwise, it will prove destructive rather than wholesome. Thus, special, repeated emphasis is placed on the importance of caution and patience: “Do not rush romance” (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). Fourth, the absence of a direct description of physical intercourse suggests that: (1) physical sexuality and its expression are private and non-ultimate. The two lovers’ delight for each other is expressed sexually but not reduced to sex; (2) marriage is the larger reality, ultimate goal, and full realization of romance; and (3) physical intimacy as an expression of love is subordinated and secondary to marriage (Ortlund, 2020, pp. 497-506). Finally, the Song of Songs also confronts the idea that marriage inexorably dulls romance in a relationship. Throughout the book, the delight of the two lovers in each other never ends (8:6-7, 14).

On the other hand, the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah is an example of an arranged marriage (Genesis 24). It provides valuable insights that can be applied to contemporary practices. First, the narrative underscores the importance of seeking divine guidance and honoring God’s will in marriage arrangements. Both Abraham and his servant relied on God’s providence to orchestrate the union of Isaac and Rebekah. Second, the story emphasizes character over social status or ethnicity. The extreme nature of the servant’s test served to reveal Rebekah’s positive character traits. Third, the passage sheds light on the importance of the bride’s consent. Even within the patriarchal society

of the time, Abraham ensures Isaac's bride-to-be has a say in the arrangement. Rebekah's family and her own agreement make this a consensual arrangement. Fourth, the manner in which goods were transferred (garments and objects of silver and gold) from Abraham to Rebekah *first* and then to her relatives at the end of the negotiation process (Gen 24:53) is noteworthy. If this is considered a bride price, it was not an amount set by Rebekah's relatives. It was a generous gift from Abraham to Rebekah and her family. Fifth, upon the arrival of Abraham's servant with Rebekah, Isaac expressed his consent by taking her to his mother's tent, a gesture signifying that she was now the mistress of the household (Walton, 2001, 532). Finally, the story suggests that arranged marriages can develop into love marriages. Isaac and Rebekah's mutual affection for each other (Genesis 26:8) demonstrates the potential for love to blossom in arranged marriages through shared experiences and a life built together. In essence, Genesis 24 offers a framework for arranged marriages that prioritizes divine guidance, spouses' characters, mutual consent, respect, and commitment to God and their marriage (Sanou and Duah, 2023, pp. 141-145).

## CONCLUSION

While customs, traditions, and specific practices for entering marriage vary across cultures, the core principles established in the Garden of Eden remain the guide for Christians. These principles also serve as the foundation for interpreting other biblical teachings on the subject. Ideally, marriage takes place in the presence of God, acknowledging him as the one who instituted this sacred union. However, the Bible does not prescribe a single, specific ceremony format. Marriage can be entered into following "the customs acknowledged in different contexts and cultures, insofar as such customs do not contradict biblical principles" (Hasel, 2015, p. 48).

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# HOME, SWEET HOME: WHAT IS OUR MOST IMPORTANT TASK?

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BY GALINA STELE

In 1913, two years before her death, Ellen White had an interesting conversation with a young man, a teacher, who was helping her with her writings and temporarily lived in her house in Elmshaven, CA (Spalding, 1949). Talking about parents' responsibilities, she said that the church should do more to educate parents on how to bring up their kids in faith. She told the young man that his "work as a father is the most important educational work" he had "ever done or ever can do." She continued that pastors, teachers, and medical personnel can do their work to educate and teach church members, "but underneath all their efforts, the first work done by the parents is the work that tells most decidedly for the upbuilding of the church" (Spalding, p. 192).

Ellen White added that she wished she could travel as before and teach this subject to the church members. The young man noted that she had written this in her books, and people had them. But Ellen White sadly replied that she was afraid that people did not read her books and did not understand that this work is "more important than anything else." Surprised, he clarified if she meant that the most important thing for the church is teaching parents how to train their children for God. She affirmed it and added: "... and we have not begun to touch it with the tips of our fingers (Spalding, p. 193).

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Since then, the Adventist Church has done a lot in this area. However, the importance of teaching parents how to train their children to have a close relationship with God and be raised in a safe and happy home is still the same for each generation. It becomes even more crucial with many families experiencing different types of crises, not functioning well, or falling apart. It is no coincidence that the definition of functional and dysfunctional families has become part of our vocabulary.

One may wonder if a Christian family can be dysfunctional. Also, we can ask if the reality of how well our family functions affects our ability to bring our children closer to God. But what are the main characteristics of functional and dysfunctional families?

## FUNCTIONAL AND DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES

It is easy to guess that functional families function well. They represent homes with healthy, warm atmospheres and healthy relations. Dysfunctional families are the opposite of happy families, filled with love, joy, and support. The word “dysfunction” reflects that something is broken or does not work properly. Norman Wright compares a dysfunctional family with a plane that lost its navigation and is going in the wrong direction. Even a tiny deviation from the course will result in the wrong destination. The same happens with families. Small things that hinder relations can bring a family to the wrong destination. And family members can find themselves in a home filled with criticism, misunderstanding, offense, and mistrust (Wright, p. 61).

Some people think that only families with a disabled child or with a family member suffering from addiction or mental illness are dysfunctional. Others consider a single-parent family or a divorced family in this category. Sadly, many people are not aware that any family, even a Christian family, can become dysfunctional if it allows certain behavioral patterns to prosper in their home. Let us look at the main differences between these two family types (Wright, pp. 60-73).

Functional Family	Characteristics	Dysfunctional Family
The home atmosphere is warm and pleasant. It is not a common practice to criticize and judge.	Atmosphere	The home atmosphere is cold. Members regularly judge, criticize, accuse, or ignore each other or other people.
There is a mutual understanding and support. Everyone has some responsibilities but is allowed to be yourself. Kids can be kids; adults are also allowed to be kids sometimes.	Mutual support and responsibilities	There are very high expectations and strict rules. Family members have low self-esteem. Parents shame or punish children if they have not met their expectations.

Functional Family	Characteristics	Dysfunctional Family
<p>Constant care for each member. Support and approval are regular.</p>	<p>Care, approval, and encouragement</p>	<p>Neglect or absence of care, or hyper care. Offenses, hurt feelings, and different kinds of abuse can be present.</p>
<p>Open and direct communication. The joy or problems of one member are important to the whole family. Fears, problems, and failures can be shared and discussed. Family members can count on understanding and acceptance. There are no rejections.</p>	<p>Communication</p>	<p>There is poor communication and a prohibition to talk about family problems in or outside the family. Family members do not share because of fear of being misunderstood, judged, or punished. There can also be communication through a third person (triangulation), e.g., “Go and tell your mom...” or communication with double messages when words tell one thing, but the voice tone or action sends different signals.</p>
<p>Parents are respected and trusted. There is a healthy interdependence of all members. Children are raised to be able to make good and right choices. Children are equally loved and treasured.</p>	<p>Relationships between parents and children</p>	<p>An authoritarian parenting style is one in which the weak members are dependent on the strong. No choices are given, or a choice between two evils, e.g., “You will eat your lunch or else!” Permissive or neglectful parenting styles may be overly lenient or disengaged. Favoritism is present: the little princess, the saint, the scapegoat, etc.</p>
<p>The family has many traditions and often spends time together, creating warm memories. Family members anticipate this time together, prepare for it, and treasure it. They also plan to have time or vacation together and enjoy such opportunities.</p>	<p>Time together</p>	<p>Time together is rare or only takes place because of obligations (family reunions, weddings, funerals, graduations, holidays, etc.). Time together often ends with fights and hurt feelings. Workaholicism of some members, e.g., parents, can be present. There are no nice traditions for time spent together.</p>

Functional Family	Characteristics	Dysfunctional Family
<p>The feelings of all family members are shared and respected. A member in trouble can count on the support of others. When one is suffering, all are suffering with them, but in a different way than in a dysfunctional family. Humor, joy, and laughter are experienced together.</p>	<p>Feelings and reasons for joy and celebrations</p>	<p>Feelings are not shared, and only certain emotions are allowed. If a family member, especially an authority figure, suffers, they will make others miserable too. Different kinds of abuse can occur. Humor is often used as a means of humiliation.</p>

Thus, these two types represent very different families. They are opposite in their extremes. The home atmosphere shapes a child's self-esteem and their identity. It affects their perception of and relationship with God. It either brings them closer to Him or prevents them from building happy relationships with their parents' God.

We have valuable advice from the Spirit of Prophecy: "Every home should be a place of love, a place where the angels of God abide, working with softening, subduing influence upon the hearts of parents and children" (White, p. 18.6). "The home that is beautified by love, sympathy, and tenderness is a place that angels love to visit, and where God is glorified. The influence of a carefully guarded Christian home in the years of childhood and youth is the surest safeguard against the corruption of the world. In the atmosphere of such a home the children will learn to love both their earthly parents and their heavenly father" (White, p. 19.2).

The apostle John cited the words from Jesus' prayer about the most important knowledge we could ever get: "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3, KJV). A happy home filled with warmth, trust, and love will transmit this knowledge of God more effectively.

## WHAT CAN WE DO?

A functional family is not a perfect family. We also meet imperfect families in the Bible: Issac and Jacob and their sons, the family of King David, Elkanah with his two wives, and others. However, God was able to use them, and He can also use our imperfect families, transform us, and make our families a blessing for our children and others. But we should be intentional in bringing our family closer to God so that He can work in it and through it. What can we do?

Here are some suggestions:

1. Treat your children as valuable people. Analyze not so much your feelings but your words and actions because they show your children how you treat them. Decide never to humiliate

your child. Remember, we all have sinful natures, both your children and you as parents. We all need God's power to transform us. However, your children are more immature and need your guidance, love, acceptance, respect, and example to imitate.

2. Build positive communication. Talk to your children about their emotions and describe yours. Allow them also to share negative feelings. It will help build trust. Let even the youngest family members share their thoughts, problems, and suggestions. Teach them how to meet difficult situations and find constructive solutions. Do not reward negative criticism. Help them evaluate actions, not people.
3. Disciple your children. Help them create habits for their spiritual life and growth: teach them how to pray in different circumstances, read the Bible, memorize some important Bible texts, and study their Sabbath School lessons. Talk with them about God, Bible characters, their failures and victories. Answer their questions and explain the church doctrines.
4. Conduct family worship using interesting stories, and involve your children. Make these evenings attractive and interactive so that your children anticipate these 15-20 minutes before bedtime. The time when the family can talk, read, sing, and pray together is priceless. You can experience that such meetings can bring unity, erase misunderstandings, and cover all with God's blessings. According to the Global Church Member Survey, conducted in all divisions of the Adventist Church in 2022-2023, 40% of the respondents answered that they had daily family worship. And an additional 26% said they had them at least weekly (Bailey et al., pp. 71-72). What about your family?
5. Regularly spend some free time with your children. Plan this time in addition to holidays and vacations. Take into consideration the suggestions and wishes of your children. Remember that time together should bring joy. Create family traditions and count God's blessings during these special times.
6. Teach your children to serve others. Involve them in community service, sick member visitations, or kind acts for neighbors. Teach them that we do this to reveal God's love.
7. Make the Sabbath experience a delight and climax of each week. Plan your activities as a family, spend time together, invite other families, visit nature, and teach them to enjoy this time with each other and God.

So, what are the characteristics of your family and my family? Let us not be discouraged if we recognize that it has some dysfunctional traits. We all are broken people, but God is in business to transform us and our families. Let us cling to His power. Let us intentionally create a happy oasis in our homes and focus on our primary task as parents—bringing our children closer to their Lord and Savior. And when the Lord comes and asks: "... Where is the flock that was given thee, thy beautiful flock?" (Jer. 13:20b, KJV). We can reply: "Here am I, and the children the LORD has given me" (Is. 8:18a, NIV).

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# AND IT WAS VERY GOOD

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BY GINA WAHLEN

It was an incredible sight—something the angels, indeed the entire universe, had never seen before—God, kneeling in the dirt, shaping a figure with His hands. Carefully, the shape of a noble head came to view, complete with eyes, a nose, a mouth, and two ears. Then, a stately neck, broad shoulders, chest, arms, hands, legs—an entire body was formed. The heavenly beings stared at the still figure in the sand, then gazed in wonder as God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7).

But all was not complete. This being—Adam—needed a mate. “And the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him’” (Genesis 2:18).

Once again, the universe watched in awe as God, after causing a deep sleep to fall on Adam, took one of his ribs and, with His own hands, shaped that rib into a beautiful woman who would later be called Eve.

## HUMAN BEINGS ARE UNIQUE

The creation of human beings was unique. Earlier during that phenomenal week, God simply spoke everything into existence—the sea and the dry land, the sun, moon, stars, grass, flowers, trees, and all living creatures in the sea, land, and air.

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But this was different. God declared: “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over . . . all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. So, God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:26).

The following verse tells us, “Then God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth’” (Genesis 1:27).

This text reveals something very important about human beings—we are not just animals. We are made in the image of God. While we do not know all that entails—it is a good indication that we no doubt resemble Him in some aspects of appearance, and most importantly, He has given us the capacity to think and reason in ways that the rest of His creatures cannot.

## THE IMAGE OF GOD

Richard M. Davidson, senior research professor of Old Testament Interpretation at Andrews University, writes: “Genesis 1:26 supports an understanding of the *imago Dei* [‘Image of God’] as resemblance—both inward (spiritual) and outward (form)” (Davidson, 2015, p. 19).

He goes on to give several examples of how humans are created in God’s image, both spiritually and physically, with the ability to make free moral choices, possessing rationality and analytic mental power, along with memory, understanding, linguistic abilities, and reasoning powers.

Regarding physical resemblance, he writes, “many expressions of divine and human activity in the Garden imply an outward resemblance of form and feature between humans and God: both God and humans speak; God plants a garden, and the human is to ‘tend and keep it’; God forms or shapes, and Adam names the animals that are formed: God breathes, has breath, and Adam has nostrils; God performs an anesthetized surgery upon Adam, removes one of his ribs, and ‘builds’ Eve; He brings Eve to Adam, and officiates at the first garden wedding. He comes ‘walking’ in the garden in the cool of the day, conducts a personal investigative judgment of the guilty pair, and makes tunics of skin to clothe Adam and Eve. The language throughout these chapters [Genesis 2 and 3] implies that the image of God is not physical or spiritual, outward or inward, but both—and, in harmony with a holistic and unitary view of human beings” (Davidson, 2015, pp. 25-26).

## “MALE AND FEMALE”

In addition to being made “in the image of God,” God created human beings “male and female” (Genesis 1:26). Clearly, God made two separate beings with unique bodies, roles, and purposes. While other creatures were made male and female, the purpose for this distinction in human beings was far greater than mere copulation and procreation.

God Himself created human sexuality to be a source of intimacy, joy, and pleasure between a man and woman, a husband and wife. Again, we can learn much from these foundational chapters

in Genesis, which provide a theology of sexuality that is assumed and developed throughout the rest of Scripture.

Davidson (2015) discusses ten components of a theology of sexuality that emerge from Genesis 1-3, which include: “(1) created by God, and not part of the divine realm; (2) heterosexual marital form; (3) monogamous marital form; (4) full equality of male and female partners in the love relationship; (5) holistic sexuality, in which the lovers need each other to be whole and their love involves the whole being (not just physical); (6) married sexual relationship as exclusive; (7) a permanent relationship in marriage; (8) an intimate married relationship; (9) sexuality primarily for the sake of love (unitive purpose), as well as procreation; and (10) sexuality as a wholesome, beautiful, and joyous gift from God” (Davidson, 2015, pp. 25-26).

This complete view of human sexuality draws a clear line between complex human beings and other creatures where copulation is for the sole purpose of procreation.

## A COUNTERFEIT MODEL

Sadly, however, God’s divine plan for human sexuality has been deeply distorted by a counterfeit model set up by Satan to bring human beings down to a level far lower than what God created them to be.

The philosophy of this counterfeit model is articulated clearly by Sharon Pope, a certified “Master Life Coach and international bestselling author and podcaster. She writes: “Be selfish. Live passionately. Love deeply. And if it feels good, by all means—do it” (Pope, 2019).

This self-centered outlook on life, encouraging one to follow their heart and be guided by their feelings, goes directly against the Bible’s emphatic statement that “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9).

## CLEAR DIRECTION

In a world where we are continually bombarded with messages claiming that everyone can determine their own “truth” regarding sexuality as well as everything else, God has given us His Word—the Bible—to be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (see Psalm 119:105).

While the Bible clearly explains the foundational concepts set out at Creation, it also recognizes the Fall and acknowledges the state of living within a fallen world. “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God,” we read in Romans 3:23. But God’s Word also gives us the assurance, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Not only that, but the Bible is replete with instructions on how to live our lives in a godly way. The book of Proverbs especially gives wise counsel on how to conduct oneself. The Ten Commandments address the issue of sexual morality, stating, “You shall not commit adultery,” clearly indicating that sexual intimacy outside of marriage is a sin. Jesus took this to an even deeper



level when He explained, “But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28).

In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, we are given a list of those who practice unrighteousness and will not inherit the kingdom of God, including “fornicators [those who have sex outside of marriage], nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.”

God’s plan for human sexuality is affirmed in Hebrews 13:4, while a warning is given for those who practice sex outside the divine plan: “Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge.”

God knows how to give good gifts to His children (see Matthew 7:11; Luke 11:13). At Creation, He made human beings in His image (Genesis 1:26). God made them male and female (Genesis 1:27). He told them to “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28). And at the end of the day, He declared that “indeed it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). Human sexuality is indeed a gift from God. As we embrace who we are—as male and female, and follow His plan for expressing our sexuality, we will come closer to the joy experienced by that first couple in Eden.

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# REPRINTED ARTICLES

— In this section you will find timeless articles that are carefully selected to assist you in your work with families.

# SAME-SEX ATTRACTION

BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

## QUESTION

**I am 19-years-old, in my second year of college. From the time I was a pre-teen I felt different than most of my peers. As I entered my teens my friends showed great interest in girls, while I continued to experience same-sex attraction. I grew up in church and was baptized at 15. I love Jesus and want to be His faithful follower. Since starting college I've been pressured by friends to embrace a gay identity and be true to myself, they say. Is it possible to do this and remain a faithful disciple of Jesus?**

Thank you for being candid about such a personal and sensitive issue, and for trusting us with it.

First, God loves you with an everlasting love (Jer. 31:3). He died to save all those who believe in Him (John 3:16).

Second, all human beings are sinners and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). That includes us and you. The good news is that God's gift to human beings is eternal life through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross (Rom. 6:23).

Third, if we love Jesus we'll keep His commandments (John 14:15). This means doing all He asks us to do (James 1:22).

Your question indicates ambivalence about your feelings (your orientation) and what you believe the Bible says about God's intent for intimate relationships. We've been told by others confronting similar circumstances: "Why would God make me this way and then not allow me to

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be who I am? I believe I should be honest with myself and accept the truth that I am gay.”

To be sure, it is important to have a correct biblical view of who we are to avoid embracing a faulty personal ethic and identity. The Bible states we were created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). This signals our identity is given by God and not based on what we feel or do. Our identity in Christ means we are united to Christ. Paul describes it by saying: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17).

Only when we begin with a biblical perspective—a God-centered view of life that accepts we were created in the image of God, and acknowledge that God’s original intent was distorted by the fall (Gen. 3)—will we be able to understand where—as in your case—your same-sex feelings come from, decide to surrender to Christ, and accept His power to live a victorious life in Him (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

We assure you the Seventh-day Adventist Church is not against you or anyone who feels like you. On the contrary, we love you and want to see you saved in God’s kingdom. What we are clearly for, though, is what’s in the Word of God (Matt. 4:4). We know it will be difficult for you to deal with your feelings (your orientation) going forward. Still, the truth is, whether you’re dealing with same-sex or heterosexual feelings, you will need to manage your feelings to honor God. “. . .but with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26). You remain in our prayers.

# WE HAVE TEENAGERS, PLEASE HELP! GUIDING PRINCIPLES FROM A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

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BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

## QUESTION

**My husband and I are parents of teenage boys with lots of energy. They are constantly pushing the boundaries. What can we do to help them use more self-control? Are they possibly rebelling because we are holding the reins too tightly? We welcome your insights and perspectives.**

Parenting teenagers is one of the most challenging yet rewarding experiences. It requires striking a delicate balance between providing enough support and independence to foster their growth into responsible adults. Both biblical teachings and psychological research offer wisdom on how to achieve this balance for maximum success.

From a biblical perspective, the book of Proverbs provides guiding principles on raising children when it shares: “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6). This verse highlights the importance of instilling values and morals

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from a young age that will stay with the child throughout life. As children enter the turbulent teenage years, parents must continue guiding them with patience, love and consistent discipline rooted in biblical truth.

The teenage years are also a critical period of identity formation where adolescents are striving for independence and autonomy. Scripture calls children to honor their parents (Eph. 6:1-4), while also indicating parents have a God-given authority to provide reasonable rules, boundaries, and accountability; and at once being careful to not exert excessive control, which can undermine their child's need for individuality and self-governance.

Good psychological research backs up this balanced approach. Studies show that authoritative parenting styles—which combine high levels of warmth/support with high expectations for maturity—lead to the best outcomes for adolescents. Teens need a secure base from which to explore and return for guidance. Overly permissive parenting without enough boundaries can promote irresponsible behavior, while harsh authoritarian control often breeds resentment and undermines wellbeing.

Notably, both the Bible and social scientists emphasize open communication. Proverbs 20:5 states: “The purposes of a person’s heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out.” Parents need wisdom to draw out and understand the interests, struggles and perspectives of their teens. Active listening, empathy and validating the adolescent’s thoughts/feelings can build the trust required for effective guidance.

As youth strive for more independence, parents can challenge them gradually with more responsibilities and freedoms proportional to their maturity level. This empowers self-discipline and ownership over choices/consequences in a supportive environment. Maintaining closeness through quality time, family traditions, and celebrations is key during this transitional period.

To be sure, the teenage years require a delicate balance of nurturing connection combined with age-appropriate challenges toward independence. The wisdom found in Scripture and sound psychological insights can equip parents to navigate this critical developmental stage with grace and efficacy.

The wisdom found in Scripture and sound psychological insights can equip parents to navigate this critical developmental stage with grace and efficacy.

With empathy, open communication, and consistent yet relaxed boundaries, parents can position their teens for joyful, responsible adulthood. Please know that you and your husband are in our prayers during this challenging time of your lives. Be encouraged by the message of James 1:5, where God promises to be generous in providing wisdom wherever there is a need. Trust Him.

Bible references are from the English Standard Version and the New International Version.

# MEANINGFUL ANNIVERSARY TRADITIONS

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BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

## QUESTIONS

**Our third wedding anniversary is coming up soon and my wife and I have been talking about making our anniversaries meaningful. Please share some ideas that will help us accomplish this goal.**

We believe you can strengthen your marriage relationship by establishing meaningful anniversary traditions that celebrate your commitment to each other and serve as annual reminders of God's grace in your lives. Here are three powerful ways you can do that:

## SPIRITUAL REFLECTION AND RENEWAL

Set aside time on your anniversary for spiritual reflection and renewal.

- Begin your anniversary day with a shared prayer session, thanking God for another year together and seeking His wisdom for the year ahead. Read and discuss a passage of scripture that resonates with your journey, such as 1 Corinthians 13 on love or Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 on partnership.
- Write individual letters to God, expressing gratitude for your spouse and marriage, confessing areas where you need growth, and committing to love each other more deeply in the coming year. Seal your letters and open them on your next anniversary to reflect on your spiritual progress.

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- Renew your wedding vows annually—privately or with your pastor. This reaffirms your commitment to each other and to God, serving as a powerful reminder of the covenant you made.

### **SERVICE AND GENEROSITY**

Include acts of service and generosity in your anniversary celebrations. This will help you focus outward, reflecting Christ's love to others while strengthening your bond. It's a reminder that your marriage is not just for your benefit but also to bless others (John 13:35).

- Choose a charitable cause each year that aligns with your values. Volunteer together at a food bank, homeless shelter, or ministry at your church. Or donate to a cause in honor of your anniversary.
- "Pay it forward" by anonymously blessing a person or couple in need. This could involve paying for a stranger's meal at a restaurant or paying for newlyweds at your church to attend an upcoming marriage retreat.

By serving others together, you will create shared experiences that build unity and purpose in your marriage; cultivating gratitude for your own blessings and keeping you focused on living out your faith in practical ways.

### **INTENTIONAL COMMUNICATION AND GOAL SETTING**

Engage in intentional communication and goal setting by establishing an annual "State of Our Union" conversation, openly discussing the highs and lows of the past year—areas where you've grown, and aspects of your relationship that need attention. Approach this conversation with love, humility, and a desire to understand each other more deeply.

- Create a marriage mission statement—if you don't already have one—outlining your shared values, priorities, and aspirations. Set specific goals related to your spiritual life, communication, intimacy, finances, or family plans.
- Choose a special location for this annual conversation—perhaps returning to the site of your honeymoon, or a favorite vacation spot. Create a journal or scrapbook to document your reflections and goals each year, allowing you to look back on your journey together.

Implementing these traditions will significantly enhance the viability of your marriage. As you consistently invest in these meaningful celebrations, you will create a legacy of love that honors your commitment to each other and to God.

You are in our prayers.



# STRENGTHENING YOUR UNION: IS MARRIAGE COUNSELING FOR NEWLYWEDS A GOOD THING?

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BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

## QUESTION

**We've been married for 18 months, and our relationship has mostly been good. Quite frequently, though, we get annoyed at each other and sometimes it takes us a good day or two before we're back to relating to each other in a "normal" way. Is it too early in our marriage to get counseling or is this something that can wait until later?**

Seeking marriage counseling early in your marriage is not only acceptable but can be highly beneficial if you're facing challenges of any kind in your marriage.

The Bible emphasizes the importance of wisdom, counsel, and community support throughout our lives, including marriage. Proverbs 11:14 shares: "Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety." This applies to all aspects of life.

To be sure, the Bible encourages us to address conflicts and seek reconciliation promptly. In Ephesians 4:26-27 we read: "Be angry, and do not sin: do not let the sun go down on your anger,

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and give no opportunity to the devil.” This proposes that we should not let issues fester but deal with them quickly and constructively.

Jesus Himself emphasized the importance of reconciliation in Matthew 5:23-24, urging believers to reconcile with others before presenting offerings to God. This underlines the priority God places on healthy relationships and the active pursuit of peace and understanding.

From a psychological standpoint, early intervention in marital difficulties can prevent the entrenchment of negative patterns and foster healthier communication and problem-solving skills. The first few years of marriage are crucial for establishing patterns that can persist throughout your marriage relationship. Addressing issues early on can help you develop a strong foundation for your future together.

Research in marriage and family therapy consistently shows that couples who seek help earlier in their relationship struggles tend to have better outcomes than those who wait until problems become severe. Early intervention can prevent the accumulation of resentment, breakdown of communication, and the erosion of trust that often occurs when problems are left unaddressed.

The idea that couples should wait several years before seeking counseling is a misconception that can lead to unnecessary suffering and relationship damage. This myth may stem from the belief that early struggles are simply part of adjusting to married life or that seeking help is a sign of weakness or failure.

Viewing counseling as a proactive step towards building a stronger and healthier marriage aligns closely with both biblical wisdom and psychological research. Just as we seek medical help for physical ailments before they become severe, addressing relational issues early can prevent more significant problems down the road.

In light of both biblical teachings and psychological research, newlyweds should feel empowered and encouraged to seek marriage counseling from a reputable Christian counselor if they’re experiencing difficulties after 18 months—or at any point in their marriage. Far from being a sign of failure, seeking counseling demonstrates wisdom, humility, and a deep commitment to nurturing a healthy, God-honoring marriage. After all, a strong marriage isn’t one without challenges, but one where both partners are committed to growing together, seeking wisdom, and addressing issues with love, patience, and sometimes, professional guidance.

Please know you are in our prayers as you trust God to help you manage your differences early. This will give you the best opportunity for a successful marriage relationship.

# RESOURCES

— The Seventh-day Adventist Church  
is constantly creating new materials  
to support your work with families.

# GROWING HEARTS OF WELCOME: UNDERSTANDING DIVERSE FAMILIES

WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER, EDITORS  
KAREN HOLFORD, PRINCIPAL CONTRIBUTOR

Review and Herald® Publishing Association  
September, 2024, 70 pages

In cultures around the world there are families with unique challenges that make them different than what may be considered the norm, especially at a time when mass migration for various reasons—war, gang violence, political and religious repression, lack of opportunities, and poverty—is in process in many parts of our planet today. Also, there are families with members who are experiencing neurodiversity, and a host of other physical, emotional and psycho-social challenges, in addition to racial, ethnic, nationality and language differences. As Christians, it is essential to approach this reality with love, compassion, and understanding, guided by the teachings of Jesus Christ.



Digital download at [family.adventist.org/familyworship](https://family.adventist.org/familyworship)

# KEYS TO HEALTHY MINDS: FLOURISHING FAMILIES

WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER, EDITORS  
KAREN HOLFORD, PRINCIPAL CONTRIBUTOR

Review and Herald® Publishing Association  
July, 2023, 36 pages

The 2023 Family Togetherness Week of Prayer resource booklet: *Keys To Healthy Minds: Flourishing Families*, shares concepts to help families and individuals flourish in their emotional health. Our prayer is that this will be a reality we can all experience as we allow God's peace, joy, hope, and healing to abide in our hearts.

Available in 12 languages:  
English, French, Italian, Latvian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Sinhala, Spanish, Tamil and Ukrainian

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# REBUILDING THE FAMILY ALTAR

BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

Review and Herald® Publishing Association

July, 2022, 42 pages



During the 2022 Family Togetherness Week of Prayer, our desire is for families to build or rebuild the altar of family worship in their homes. Family worship gives every family an opportunity to daily rebuild the altar of God.

Rebuilding the family altar means to establish a regular habit of setting aside time to worship God as a family. The most important thing is to make a commitment to doing something that intentionally points your family to God daily. Bring God into your big and small moments!

Digital download at [family.adventist.org/familyworship](https://family.adventist.org/familyworship)

# LIVING FRUITFUL LOVE

BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER, WITH KAREN HOLFORD

Review and Herald® Publishing Association  
July, 2021, 26 pages

The Bible speaks about another kind of fruit that is not bought at the market or cultivated at the orchard or farm. In the book of Galatians, the Apostle Paul uses fruit to show what will happen to us when we choose to be filled with the Spirit of Jesus. The fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are virtues that are cultivated when we are filled with the Spirit of Jesus in our hearts. It is the result of having a relationship with Jesus and allowing His Spirit to flow in us and through us.



Digital download at [family.adventist.org/familyworship](https://family.adventist.org/familyworship)

# CONNECTED: DEVOTIONAL READINGS FOR AN INTIMATE MARRIAGE

BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

The Stanbrough Press Ltd., 2020

162 pages

Imagine if you could take your marriage up to the next level. What if it were possible to go from a relationship that survives to one that thrives? What if there were a way to strengthen your commitment to each other? What if better communication could create greater trust? And, best of all, what if grace could help you see the best in your spouse?

In *Connected: devotional readings for an intimate marriage*, Willie and Elaine Oliver share over 35 years of marriage experience, growing together, learning from each other, and rearing children. They know how to make the 'what ifs' become reality.

With 52 devotional reflections, there's a thought for each week of the year, specifically designed to help couples to pause (reflect on the ideas shared), pray (about the ideas shared and how they relate to their experience) and then choose (determine to experience change together).

Available at [adventistbookcenter.com](http://adventistbookcenter.com)





# COUPLE'S BIBLE

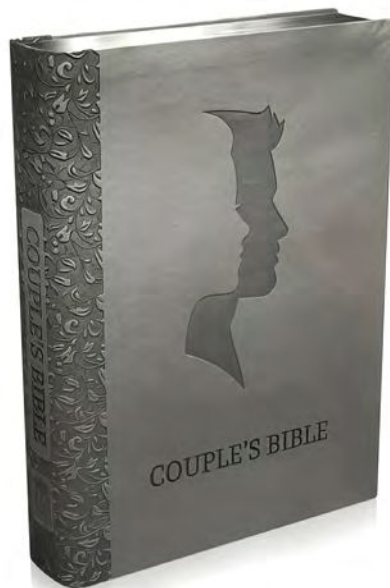
Safeliz, 2019

1,500 pages

The Couple's Bible is designed to help build and nurture relationships. There are more than 170 topics that are divided into five sections focusing on how to strengthen marriage, and parenting relationships, as well as how to overcome challenges that couples face. Special features include:

- Marriage in the Bible, Biblical Theology of the Family, Pillars Undergirding Family Ministries, Special Texts for Couples and more
- A special Bible course on home and family
- 101 Ideas for Family Evangelism
- Marriage vocabulary dictionary and maps
- And much more...

The Bible is available in several languages including English, Spanish and French and can be ordered at Adventist Book Centers throughout the world or by visiting: [www.safelizbibles.com](http://www.safelizbibles.com)



# LEADERSHIP CERTIFICATION PROGRAM 2.0

GENERAL CONFERENCE ADVENTIST FAMILY MINISTRIES



The Family Ministries Leadership Certification Program 2.0 offers a transformative 50-hour training designed to cultivate a new generation of family life educators around the world. This comprehensive program responds to the urgent need for skilled facilitators who can address the pressing issues facing families today. With marriage rates declining globally and issues such as out-of-wedlock births,

high divorce rates, and alternative living arrangements on the rise, this leadership training aims to strengthen the family unit, which remains the cornerstone of societal health and well-being.

Please contact the department of **Adventist Family Ministries** at [family@gc.adventist.org](mailto:family@gc.adventist.org) for more information.

# REAL FAMILY TALK

WITH WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER



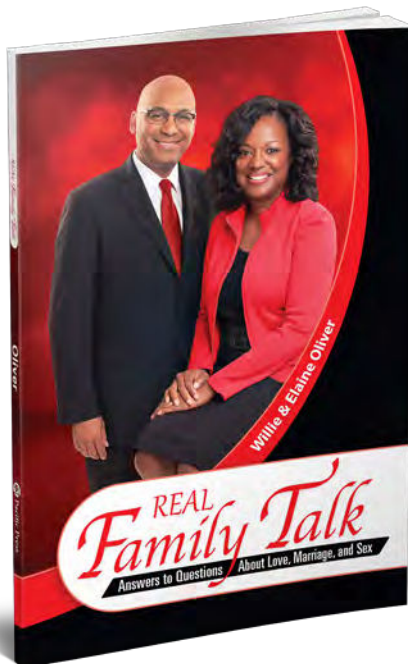
Through engaging, informative, and spiritual discussions about issues facing today's families, *Real Family Talk* seeks to strengthen families and inspire hope. In each edition, the Olivers draw from their pastoral, educational, and counseling experience to navigate discussions about family life, approaching each topic with practical solutions and sound biblical principles.

Watch now on [www.hopetv.org/realfamilytalk](http://www.hopetv.org/realfamilytalk), and [youtube.com/@realfamilytalkTV](https://youtube.com/@realfamilytalkTV)

# REAL FAMILY TALK: ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ABOUT LOVE, MARRIAGE AND SEX

BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

Pacific Press® Publishing Association  
Nampa, Idaho, 2015  
127 pages



This book is a compilation of selected columns on relationships written by Willie and Elaine Oliver for *Message* magazine in response to questions from real people. The authors provide expert advice, based on biblical principles, for questions about marriage, sex, parenting, being single and other real relationships issues. In their counsel, the authors remind us of the reality that we all face challenges in our relationships and in our homes. Their discerning answers direct us to seek God's guidance, reminding us that God's plan is for us to have healthy homes and relationships where each person seeks the harmony that God desires for us to experience.

# HOPE FOR TODAY'S FAMILIES

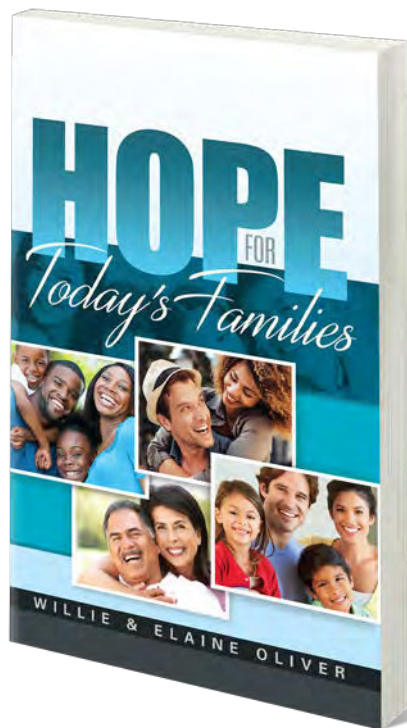
BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2018

94 pages

The 2019 world missionary book of the year is still good to help strengthen marriages and families any time. It offers *Hope for Today's Families* using time-proven principles that will facilitate a meaningful and happy life.

Available in many languages at Adventist Book Centers worldwide or through your local publishing house.



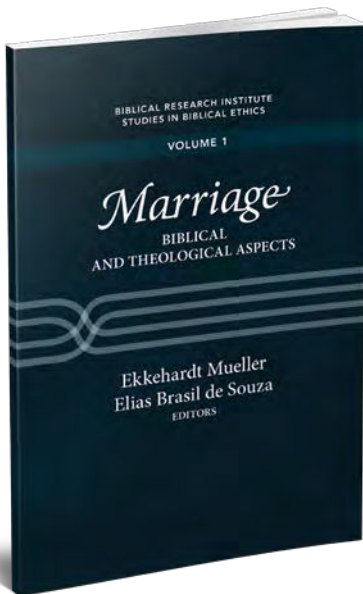
# MARRIAGE: BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL ASPECTS, VOL. 1

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EKKEHARDT MUELLER AND ELIAS BRASIL DE SOUZA, EDITORS

Biblical Research Institute. Review and Herald Publishing, 2015

304 pages



This book offers thoughtful and detailed studies on several areas of concern for pastors, church leaders, and members. After showing the beauty of marriage and the relevance of Scripture to a sound understanding of marriage and sexuality, this volume tackles crucial topics such as singleness, gender and roles in marriage, sexuality, religiously mixed marriages, and divorce and remarriage.

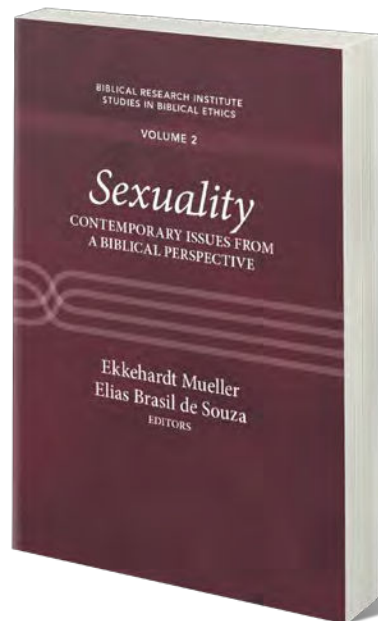
# SEXUALITY: CONTEMPORARY ISSUES FROM A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE, VOL. 2

EKKEHARDT MUELLER AND ELIAS BRASIL DE SOUZA, EDITORS

Biblical Research Institute, 2022

643 pages

Sexuality: Contemporary Issues from a Biblical Perspective is the sequel to Marriage: Biblical and Theological Aspects. Focusing on sexuality, this volume addresses several topics of contemporary relevance to individual Christians and church communities around the world. It wrestles with matters directly or indirectly related to marriage, such as cohabitation and polygamy. It also examines topics not necessarily connected to marriage, such as sexual addiction, cybersex, robotic sex, rape, female genital mutilation, child sexual abuse, and queer theology and practice.

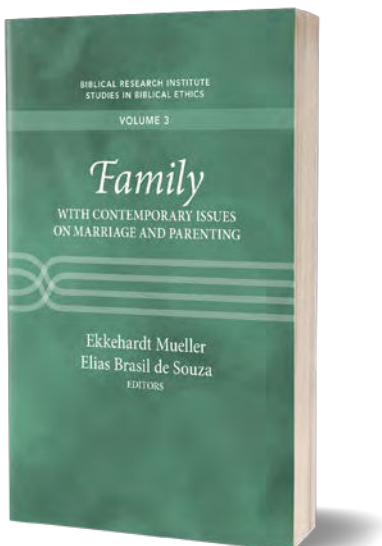


# FAMILY: WITH CONTEMPORARY ISSUES ON MARRIAGE AND PARENTING, VOL. 3

EKKEHARDT MUELLER AND ELIAS BRASIL DE SOUZA, EDITORS

Biblical Research Institute. Review and Herald Publishing, 2023

689 pages



*Family: Contemporary Issues on Marriage and Parenting* concludes the three-volume series on marriage and sexuality published by the Biblical Research Institute. This volume addresses topics and issues relevant to the family from the perspective of a biblical theology of marriage as established at creation. A major goal of this volume is to bring biblical clarity to the challenging topics its authors have addressed and thus help readers face challenges regarding family and sexuality based on the authority of God's Word.



# ARMOR OF GOD

GENERAL CONFERENCE CHILDREN'S MINISTRIES



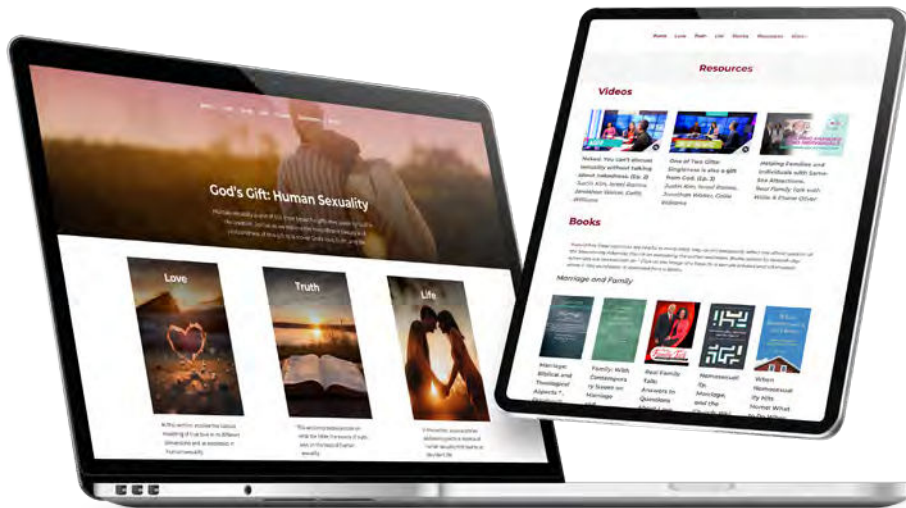
Get ready to suit up! The Armor of God is an interactive app for children that helps them learn the principles taught in Ephesians 6:10-20.

In a region where the apostle Paul possibly wrote the book of Ephesians, twins Anya and Aiden begin an adventure with their parents. Here is where they learn that the Armor of God isn't a military command but a call to be principled and just. Each piece of armor has a story. With each story unlock games focused on the principle of each piece of armor.

Search for **Armor of God Kids App** on the Apple Appstore or Google Play Store

# HUMAN SEXUALITY .ORG

GENERAL CONFERENCE OF SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS



Human sexuality is one of the most beautiful gifts ever given by God to His creation. Join us as we explore the magnificent beauty and profoundness of this gift to discover God's love, truth, and life.

An official Seventh-day Adventist website providing practical, biblically-based articles, stories, videos, and more.

Visit [www.humansexuality.org](http://www.humansexuality.org)

# APPENDIX A FAMILY MINISTRIES IMPLEMENTATION

— Please use these documents as part of your work in Family Ministries. The contents are the result of working with families in our church around the world.

Note: Some of the recommendations listed in these forms may need to be adapted and modified to the specific needs and laws where you live.

## **DOWNLOADABLE MATERIALS**

To download the Appendix A surveys and forms please visit our website: [family.adventist.org/2025RB](https://family.adventist.org/2025RB)

# A FAMILY MINISTRIES POLICY AND PURPOSE STATEMENT

The congregation and staff of the:

.....

Church are committed to providing a safe environment to help children learn to love and follow Jesus Christ. It is the purpose of this congregation to prevent any form of child abuse physical, emotional or sexual and to protect children and those who work with them.

Churches with programs for children are not insulated from those who abuse: therefore, this congregation believes that it is vitally important to take decisive steps to ensure that the church and its programs are safe, providing a joyful experience for children and youth. The following policies have been established and reflect our commitment to provide protective care of all children when they are attending any church sponsored activity.

- Volunteers who work with children and youth are required to be active members of this congregation for a minimum of six months, and must be approved by appropriate church personnel before they may begin working directly with children, unless there has been previous documented clearance.
- All NAD employees and NAD volunteers who regularly work with children must complete an application form (see NAD’s Children’s Ministries website: <https://www.childmin.org/childrens-safety>). References must be obtained from potential volunteers. Appropriate personnel or staff must check those references. Other divisions are encouraged to follow this procedure.
- All workers with children should observe the “two person” rule, which means that workers must avoid one-on-one situations with children whenever possible.

- Adult survivors of childhood physical or sexual abuse need the love and acceptance of the church family. Individuals with such a history must discuss their desire to work with children and youth with one of the staff in a confidential interview prior to receiving approval to work in these areas.
- Individuals who have committed physical or sexual abuse, whether or not convicted, may not work in church –sponsored activities or programs for children or youth.
- Opportunities for training in prevention and recognition of child abuse will be provided by the church. Workers will be expected to participate in such training.
- Workers should immediately report to the pastor or administration any behaviors or other incidents that seem abusive or inappropriate. Upon notification, appropriate actions will be taken and reports made in compliance with the operating procedure of these policies.
- Guidelines for volunteers who work with your and children will be provided to each volunteer.
- Children shall not be allowed to roam around the church without adult supervision. Parents are responsible for supervising their children before and after Sabbath School.
- No child should be released to use the restroom unless accompanied by a parent or older sibling.
- A responsible adult shall be designated to circulate in and around the church, including parking areas to provide security. This is critical when only one adult is present at some activities for minors, such as a Sabbath School division.
- Any discipline shall occur within the visual contact of another adult. All forms of corporal punishment are strictly prohibited.
- All meetings for children or youth must have the approval of the pastor and/or church board, especially overnight activities. Minors must have signed parental permission for each trip, including emergency medical treatment release.
- If there is a known sex offender attending a church, a deacon or other responsible adult shall be assigned to monitor the person while on the premises or at off-site church activity. The offender shall be informed of the procedure. If a sex offender transfers to or attends another church, the leadership of that church shall be notified.

# THE FAMILY MINISTRIES LEADER

The family ministries leader designs a ministry to families that will meet the specific needs of the congregation and community. This section provides planning support for family ministries leaders. Planning is critical for ministering to the individuals and families in the congregation. Family ministries is also an excellent way to reach out to families in the community. The family ministries leader is a member of the local church board and integrates family ministries activities to the whole church program. Listed below are responsibilities and activities.

1. Develop and chair a small family ministries committee that reflects the distinctiveness of the congregation. It may include a single parent, young married persons, mid-life families, retired, widowed or divorced persons. People who serve on this committee should be carefully chosen as visionary people reflecting the grace of God.
2. Be a family advocate. Family ministries is not merely program-oriented, but must look at the whole church program with sensitivity to its impact on families. In some situations the family ministries leader may need to advocate for family time. In other words, there may be so many programs going on in a congregation that people have little time to live their own lives as families.
3. Survey family needs and interests in the congregation. The needs assessment survey and family profile sheet may be used to help determine the needs of the congregation.
4. Plan programs and activities for the year that may include video presentations, retreats or special speakers who present workshops and seminars. Plans should

- also include simple activities that may be suggested to families through the church bulletin or newsletter.
5. Work with the pastor and church board to be sure plans are included in the local church budget.
  6. Make use of the resources available from the conference family ministries department. These can save time, energy and serve to keep costs down for the local congregation. When planning for special presentations, the conference family ministries director is able to assist in finding interesting and qualified presenters.
  7. Communicate with the congregation. Family ministries should not be perceived simply as an annual event. Keep the importance of good family skills alive by use of posters, the church newsletter and/or bulletin throughout the year.
  8. Share your plans with the conference family ministries director.

# WHAT IS A FAMILY?

One of the tasks of a family ministries leader is to define the families to whom they minister within their congregations. A ministry only to married couples with children, for example, will benefit only a small percentage of the people in the church. Families of all sorts may need guidance as they move toward healthy relationships. The work of coping with the daily tasks of sharing a household and managing conflict is never easy when people share space and resources or come from homes with differing values. Here are some of the ways families today are configured.

- Families are nuclear – with Mom, Dad and children who were born to this Mom and Dad.
- Families are stepfamilies – sometimes called blended. Stepfamilies are formed when parents divorce or are widowed and remarry. Some become stepfamilies when an unmarried parent marries someone not the father/mother of his/her child.
- Families are single – sometimes just me and the cat – living alone. They may be divorced, widowed or never married, but the household is a separate entity. Some singles may live with other singles in one household.
- Families are single parent – This may occur when a parent is divorced or widowed and has not remarried, or is a parent who has never married.
- Families are empty nest families – Mom and Dad when the kids leave home.
- Families are re-attached – When adult children come back to live with Mom and Dad – usually a temporary arrangement. A family is re-attached when an older parent lives with the family of a son or daughter or grandchild.



- Families are a part of the family of God. Many consider members in their congregation as family and may feel closer ties to them than those related by birth or marriage.

Beyond the usual family demographics one can also stimulate people to think about their important relationships, including those in the church family, by posing questions like these:

- If an earthquake destroyed your town, who would you be most desperate to locate to be sure they were okay?
- If you were moving a thousand miles away, who would move with you?
- Who would be the ones you'd stay in touch with, however difficult it might be?
- If you developed a long-term illness, who could you count on to take care of you?
- Who will be your family from now until you or they die?
- From whom could you borrow money and not feel like you had to pay it back right away?

# COMMITTEE AND PLANNING GUIDELINES

Family ministries leaders who are either new to the position or have never served as a leader wonder where to begin! This section is to help a leader get started. It is often helpful to select a small committee with whom one can work well—people well oriented in the grace of Christ and who don't have the proverbial ax to grind. A family ministries committee, more than any other, should seek to model family. What follows are some ways to accomplish that. While these ideas are not the only way to work, they can help a group work together more smoothly. (They may be helpful to other committees as well).

- Select a small number of persons with similar concerns for families. They should represent the variety of families found in the congregation. This committee might have a single parent, married couple, divorced, retired or widowed persons, and reflect the gender and ethnic profile of the church.
- The committee should not be too large—five to seven persons are ideal. Individuals may represent more than one family category.
- Especially for the first meeting, gather in an informal setting—perhaps at someone's home or a comfortable room at the church. Begin with prayer for God's blessing.
- Provide light refreshments that include water or hot or cold drinks, something light too much on like fresh fruit, cookies, or nuts. Make it attractive, but not fussy or involving great effort.
- For the first meeting, spend time telling each other your story. This is not a therapy session so let people know that they should tell only what is comfortable. A few guidelines will help: confidentiality is to be respected and seen as a gift to one

another. It might be good for the leader to begin—starting with sentences like, “I was born in..., raised in a (Methodist, Seventh-day Adventist, Catholic or whatever) home.” Include other things like where you went to school, children’s names or other pertinent information. Include how you became a Christian or a Seventh-day Adventist or a pleasant or funny story from childhood. This may seem like a waste of time. But you may be surprised to hear the story of someone you thought you knew for a long time. The telling of our stories is how we connect and bond with each other. It will make your work together go more smoothly. It will also make it easier for committee members to be sensitive to the needs of one another.

- For all subsequent meetings, spend a portion of time—perhaps 10 or 20 minutes in re-connecting with your committee members. One might be rejoicing over an important event. Another may need support with a special need. Here are some questions you could ask to start your meetings:
  - \* Who are the people you consider to be your close family?
  - \* How do you live your faith together as a family?
  - \* What do you think the church could do to help your family?
  - \* What do you like best about your family?

Then move to the agenda. Remember that you are modeling family.

- Review results of the Interest Survey.
- Talk about goals. What do you wish to accomplish? Will it meet a need? Who are you trying to reach? How can you accomplish your goals?
- Pray for God’s blessing, plan wisely so that people do not burn out and ministry is soon underway.

An important resource for Family Ministries leader is the Family Ministries Planbook. A new edition of this resource book is published every year and includes programs, sermon outlines, seminars and much more that can be used as part of your yearly program.

# A GOOD PRESENTATION WILL DO FOUR THINGS

1. **INFORM** – People should learn something they did not know prior to attending your presentation.
2. **ENTERTAIN** – People deserve not to be bored!!!
3. **TOUCH THE EMOTIONS** – Information that only informs the head never makes a change in attitude or behavior.
4. **MOVE TO ACTION** – If participants leave your presentation without a desire to DO something different –you have wasted your time and theirs!

## HANDOUTS

- Distribute only when they are relevant to the presentation.
- Sometimes it's best not to distribute handouts until the end of the meeting: the audience shouldn't be rustling papers while you are speaking.
- Your audience should not read ahead and tune you out.
- Don't just copy someone else's presentation for your handouts.

## INTRODUCTION

- Find out who will introduce you.
- Write your own introduction.
- Contact the person at least two days before and give them the introduction.
- Pronounce any unusual words– check accuracy of all information.
- Don't make assertions that are not true.

# THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF PRESENTATIONS

1. **Know Thyself** – Body language and tone of voice make up 93% of your credibility. Would you be interested in you?
2. **Be prepared** – Know your presentation, your equipment and be ready for mishaps. Projectors always blow bulbs in the midst of important presentations so keep a spare, and know how to change it.
3. **Examine Your Speech** – Use direct expressions, and don't seek to impress—you're there to communicate.
4. **Arrive Early** – Your guests might be waiting. Be there at least a half hour before the presentation to make certain that everything is set up the way you want it to be.
5. **Tell Them What to Expect** – Tell the meeting attendees specifically what they will learn in the course of the meeting and how they will be able to apply their new knowledge. Clear goals keep attendees focused on their own responsibilities as active participants.
6. **Less Is More** – Your audience can only take so much, so limit your main points. Seven main points is roughly the maximum your audience can take in and fully contain.
7. **Keep Eye Contact** – Use note cards instead of a completely scripted speech, so you can look up and keep eye contact with your audience. Avoid the urge to READ a presentation. Your audience response will be thanks enough for sticking your neck out.
8. **Be Dramatic** – Use bold words and unusual statistics. Your presentation should be filled with simple, hard-hitting statements to keep your audience intrigued. Laughter never hurts either!
9. **Motivate** – End your presentation with a call to action. Tell your audience exactly what they can do in response to your presentation.
10. **Take A Deep Breath, and Relax!** – Don't huddle over the lectern. If you are standing behind one, stand up tall. Move around. Use gestures for emphasis. Remember how you say something is as important as what you have to say.

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Reprinted from Family Ministries Handbook: The complete how-to guide for local church leaders. (2003). Lincoln, NE: AdventSource. Used with permission

# FAMILY LIFE PROFILE SURVEY

Name ..... Date of Birth .....

Age group:  18-30  31-40  41-50  51-60  61-70  71+

Gender:  M  F

Address .....

Telephone (Home) ..... (Work) .....

Baptized SDA  Yes  No

If Yes, local church membership .....

If No, what is your religious background/present affiliation? .....

Marital status:

Single, never married

Single, divorced

Single, widowed

Married—Spouse's name ..... Date of Birth .....

Spouse is SDA—Local church membership

Spouse is not SDA—Present religious affiliation

Children whose primary residence is with you:

Name ..... Birthdate .....

Grade in school ..... School attending .....

Baptized SDA? ..... Local church membership .....

Name ..... Birthdate .....

Grade in school ..... School attending .....

Baptized SDA? ..... Local church membership .....

Children whose primary residence is elsewhere:

Name ..... Birthdate .....  
 Baptized SDA? ..... Local church membership .....

Name ..... Birthdate .....  
 Baptized SDA? ..... Local church membership .....

Other family members living with you:

Name ..... Birthdate .....  
 Baptized SDA? ..... Local church membership .....  
 Family Relationship .....

Name ..... Birthdate .....  
 Baptized SDA? ..... Local church membership .....  
 Family Relationship .....

What is the most significant thing the Family Ministries Committee could do this year to address the interests/needs of your family?

.....  
 .....

I am interested in Family Ministries and am willing to help by

- Telephoning as needed
- Participating in planning sessions
- Providing transportation
- Preparation for events
- Help with meals/refreshments
- Child care
- Advertising
- Other
- Presenting lectures/classes/seminars/workshops or other presentations

Your interest area(s)

.....

# FAMILY LIFE PROFILE

Church ..... Date .....

## FAMILY CATEGORY

### Active Members

- With Children Under 18
- No Children Under 18

### Married—Spouse is a Member

- Ages 18-30
- Ages 31-50
- Ages 51-60
- Ages 61-70
- Ages 71 +

### Single—Never Married

- Ages 18-30
- Ages 31-50
- Ages 51-60
- Ages 61-70
- Ages 71 +

### Inactive Members

- With Children Under 18
- No Children Under 18

### Married—Spouse is a Non-member

- Ages 18-30
- Ages 31-50
- Ages 51-60
- Ages 61-70
- Ages 71 +

### Single—Divorced

- Ages 18-30
- Ages 31-50
- Ages 51-60
- Ages 61-70
- Ages 71 +



# FAMILY MINISTRIES INTEREST SURVEY

Your age group:  18-30  31-40  41-50  51-60  61-70  71+  
Gender:  M  F

From the topics below, please select the five that are of most interest to you.  
Place a check in front of each one you select:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Preparation for marriage   | <input type="checkbox"/> Worship and devotional life  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family finance             | <input type="checkbox"/> Communication                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Discipline in the home     | <input type="checkbox"/> Single adult living          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Parenting teenagers        | <input type="checkbox"/> Improving self-worth         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Preparation for childbirth | <input type="checkbox"/> Resolving anger and conflict |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Divorce recovery           | <input type="checkbox"/> Television and media         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Single parenting           | <input type="checkbox"/> Preparation for retirement   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sexuality                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Chemical dependency issues   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Enriching your marriage    | <input type="checkbox"/> Blended families             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grief recovery             | <input type="checkbox"/> Death and dying              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Understanding temperaments | <input type="checkbox"/> Coping with widowhood        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Please list): ..... |   |

Suggested guest speakers/presenters: .....

Name .....

Address ..... Telephone .....

Area(s) of specialty .....

What time of the day and what day of the week is best for you to attend a 1-1/2 - 2 hour program on one of the above topics? (Check the appropriate periods.)

	Sun.	Mon.	Tue.	Wed.	Thu.	Fri.	Sat.
Morning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Afternoon	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Evening	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

# COMMUNITY FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION SURVEY

1. What do you believe is the number one problem facing families in this community right now?

.....

2. Would you consider attending any of these Family Life Seminars if they were offered in this area?  
(Select as many as you wish.)

- How to Handle Conflict
- Communication in Marriage
- Marriage Enrichment or Encounter
- Understanding Children
- Self-Esteem
- Parenting Skills
- Dealing with Teenagers
- Childbirth Preparation Class
- Other (Please specify).....
- Divorce Recovery
- Stress Management
- Overcoming Loneliness Weekend
- Family Finances
- Grief Recovery
- Time Management and Life Priorities
- Planning Retirement

3. What time of the day and what day of the week is best for you to attend a 1-1/2 - 2 hour program on one of the above topics? (Check the appropriate periods.)

	Sun.	Mon.	Tue.	Wed.	Thu.	Fri.	Sat.
Morning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Afternoon	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Evening	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

4. It will help strengthen this survey if we could obtain the following information about you:

Sex:  M  F

Age: (Please circle the appropriate group.)

- 17 or under  19-30  31-40  41-50  51-60  61-70  71+

Do you have children under 18 years of age in your home?  Yes  No

Are you:

- Never married
- Married
- Separated
- Divorced
- Widowed
- Remarried after divorce

# SAMPLE EVALUATION

1. What inspired you most about this workshop?

.....

2. What did you learn that you didn't know before?

.....

3. Were the concepts in this workshop presented in a clear manner?

.....

4. Which activity/section was of least value to you?

.....

5. How could this workshop be improved?

.....

6. On a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being generally dissatisfied and 5 being very satisfied, how would you rate this workshop? Circle one.

1             2             3             4             5  
Generally    Somewhat    Somewhat    Generally    Very  
Dissatisfied    Dissatisfied    Satisfied    Satisfied    Satisfied

7. Who made this evaluation?

Your age group:    18-30    31-40    41-50    51-60    61-70    71+

Gender:    M    F

Marital Status:

Never married     Married  
 Separated             Divorced  
 Widowed

How long have you been married, divorced, separated or widowed?

..... years            ..... months

Thank you for your honest comments, they will help us in planning future workshops!

# APPENDIX B VOTED STATEMENTS

— The following *Voted Statements*  
are official positions of the  
Seventh-day Adventist Church.

# AFFIRMATION OF MARRIAGE

Issues related to marriage can be seen in their true light only as they are viewed against the background of the divine ideal for marriage. Marriage was divinely established in Eden and affirmed by Jesus Christ to be both monogamous and heterosexual, a lifelong union of loving companionship between a man and a woman. In the culmination of His creative activity, God fashioned humankind as male and female in His own image; and He instituted marriage, a covenant-based union of the two genders physically, emotionally, and spiritually, spoken of in Scripture as “one flesh.”

Arising from the diversity of the two human genders, the oneness of marriage images in a singular way the unity within diversity of the Godhead. Throughout Scripture, the heterosexual union in marriage is elevated as a symbol of the bond between Deity and humanity. It is a human witness to God’s self-giving love and covenant with His people. The harmonious affiliation of a man and a woman in marriage provides a microcosm of social unity that is time-honored as a core ingredient of stable societies. Further, the Creator intended married sexuality not only to serve a unitive purpose, but to provide for the propagation and perpetuation of the human family. In the divine purpose, procreation springs from and is entwined with the same process whereby husband and wife may find joy, pleasure and physical completeness. It is to a husband and wife whose love has enabled them to know each other in a deep sexual bond that a child may be entrusted. Their child is a living embodiment of their oneness. The growing child thrives in the atmosphere of married love and unity in which he or she was conceived and has the benefit of a relationship with each of the natural parents.

The monogamous union in marriage of a man and a woman is affirmed as the divinely ordained foundation of the family and social life and the only morally appropriate locus of

genital or related intimate sexual expression. However, the estate of marriage is not God's only plan for the meeting of human relational needs or for knowing the experience of family. Singleness and the friendship of singles are within the divine design as well. The companionship and support of friends looms in importance in both biblical testaments. The fellowship of the Church, the household of God, is available to all regardless of their married state. Scripture, however, places a solid demarcation socially and sexually between such friendship relations and marriage.

To this biblical view of marriage the Seventh-day Adventist Church adheres without reservation, believing that any lowering of this high view is to that extent a lowering of the heavenly ideal. Because marriage has been corrupted by sin, the purity and beauty of marriage as it was designed by God needs to be restored. Through an appreciation of the redemptive work of Christ and the work of His Spirit in human hearts, the original purpose of marriage may be recovered and the delightful and wholesome experience of marriage realized by a man and a woman who join their lives in the marriage covenant.

# AN AFFIRMATION OF GOD'S GIFT OF SEXUALITY

Human beings are created in the image of a relational God and designed to enjoy an intimate relationship with their Creator and one another (Gen. 1:26, 27; Matt. 22:37-39; John 17:3; 1 John 4:11, 12). From the beginning, God fashioned humankind in two genders, male and female (Gen. 1:27). Magnificent expressions of His creative genius, the man and woman evoked His deepest satisfaction and passionate acclaim. Both were sexual creatures by their very nature, and God intended that they would rejoice in their maleness or femaleness. His creative work was “very good” (Gen. 1:31)! There was nothing incomplete or shameful about what He had made. Maleness and femaleness afford a primary basis for human beings to define their personhood and their relationships with God and each other (Ps. 8:3-6; 100:3; Is. 43:1, 3, 4; Jer. 1:5; 1 John 4:7, 8).

God created male and female to complement one another (Gen. 2:18, 20-22). In Eden, they shared equally God's image and blessing. Together they were given responsibility for dominion over and care for the earth, and for procreation (Gen. 1:26-28). They were created with an intrinsic longing and desire for one another, physically, sexually, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually (Gen. 2:23-25; Prov. 5:18, 19; Song of Sol. 2:16, 17; 4:9). With the creation of the sexes, each came to understand self and other (Gen. 2:23). In the moment they met for the first time, the yearning of Adam's heart and soul for partnership and intimate communion burst forth into joyous acclamation: “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen. 2:23). Immediately they recognized each other as companions, counterparts, persons capable of meeting one another's needs. Each saw the other as one corresponding to their being, one equal but different, someone to love who would love in return (Gen. 2:18, 20b-23).

The Bible presents a wholistic view of human beings with no dichotomy between body and spirit (Gen. 2:27; Ps. 63:1; 84:1, 2, 1 Thess. 5:23). In both the Old and New Testaments, sexuality is clearly regarded as a valuable gift from God, to be received with gratitude and freely enjoyed within the marriage relationship (Gen. 1:24, 25; Prov. 5:15-19; Song of Sol. 2:16; 4:16-5:1; 1 Cor. 7:1-5). Sexual expression within marriage is portrayed as wholesome and honorable (Ps. 139:13-16; Song of Sol. 4:10-16; 7:1-9; 1 Cor. 6:19). The Scripture's positive attitude towards human sexuality is further confirmed by the use of the imagery of marital intimacy to describe God's relationship with His people (Is. 54:5; 62:4,5; Jer. 3:14; Ez. 16:8; Hos. 2:19, 20; Rev. 19:6-9).

In marriage, God intended that one man and one woman would be joined together for life by covenant promise (Gen. 2:24,25; Song of Sol. 2:16; Mal. 2:13, 14; Matt. 19:4-6). This marriage relationship is described as one flesh (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:5) and presumes a sexual union (1 Cor. 7:1-6). The Scripture affirms sexual pleasure between husband and wife for its unitive purposes, apart from procreation. God intends for the sexual relationship to bond husband and wife together as they bring to one another companionship, emotional support, spiritual fulfillment, joy and sexual pleasure (Gen. 2:24, 25; Prov. 5:15-19; Eccl. 9:9; Song of Sol. 4:16-5:1; Eph. 5:21-33). A loving marriage and sexual union was also God's chosen setting for procreation (Gen. 1:28; 4:1). Such a relationship provides the most secure environment for the care and nurture of children (Eph. 6:4).

Sexual intimacy finds its deepest meaning in husband-wife relationships characterized by love, closeness, mutuality and commitment. In God's design, the sexual relationship is one of respect, mutual desire and consent and loving fulfillment of one another's needs (Prov. 5:15-23; Song of Sol. 2:16-17; 4:16-5:1; 7:8-10; Mal. 2:15; 1 Cor. 7:3-5). In the context of their commitment to Christ and one another, couples make decision together about their sexual experience. The biblical principles of mutual submission (Eph. 5:21) and thoughtful care for one another's needs and desires (Phil. 2:4) help couples to reach decisions which are satisfying to both husband and wife. Sexual practice that harms or threatens the physical, emotional or spiritual health and well-being of one or both partners violates the Scripture's elevated view of persons and its call to care for the body as God's handiwork and dwelling place (Gen. 2:25; Ps. 63:1; 139:13-16; 1 Cor 3:16-17).

As God surveyed His creation, He observed, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him" (Gen. 2:18). Though the creation story establishes marriage as God's primary answer to aloneness (Gen. 2:24), in the broader sense aloneness is dispelled through connection with God and fellow human beings in mutually satisfying relationships (Rom. 14:7). All human beings were created for life in community, where persons whose differences would otherwise separate them are bound together as one in Jesus Christ (Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:12, 13; Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:14-22; 4:1-6). While some, by choice or circumstance, are single, they may experience wholeness as individuals, connect with others through family and friends, and bring glory to God as single men and women (Matt. 19:12; 1 Cor. 7:7, 8). Sexual intimacy is reserved for a husband and wife whose relationship is protected by covenant promise (Prov. 5:15-19; Song of Sol. 2:6,7; 3:5; 8:3,4; 4:12; 8:8-10; Hos. 3:3).



As a result of sin, sexuality has been devalued and, in many cases, wrenched apart from intimacy, love and covenant relationship. Because sexuality is such a powerful vehicle for connectedness, and because it is such an intrinsic part of the wholistic nature of human beings, whenever it is damaged, debased, abused, misused, or counterfeited, the repercussions have an enormous impact on the persons and their relationships. Scripture cries out against such travesty. It calls Christians to flee from sexual immorality and, by God's grace, to stretch toward the full restoration of His original design for sexuality (Prov. 5:15-20; Hos. 2:2; 6:1-3; 1 Cor. 6:15-20; Gal. 5:16-26; Eph. 5:3-10; 21-33; Col. 3:1-19; 1 Thess. 5:23, 24).

While condemning as sin our selfish failures to reflect God-given norms for sexuality, Scripture demonstrates Jesus' readiness to forgive those who repent of sexual sins. God's renewing power and love have enabled many to experience a transformation from sexual brokenness to healing, wholeness, and peace (Luke 7:36-50; John 4:4-28; 8:1-11).

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This statement originated at the World Commission on Human Sexuality, October 1997. It was approved and voted by four departmental world advisories in March 2001; Departments of Family Ministries, Health Ministries, Women's Ministries and Chaplaincy Ministries.

# FUNDAMENTAL BELIEF ON MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY

Marriage was divinely established in Eden and affirmed by Jesus to be a lifelong union between a man and a woman in loving companionship. For the Christian a marriage commitment is to God as well as to the spouse, and should be entered into only between a man and a woman who share a common faith. Mutual love, honor, respect, and responsibility are the fabric of this relationship, which is to reflect the love, sanctity, closeness, and permanence of the relationship between Christ and His church. Regarding divorce, Jesus taught that the person who divorces a spouse, except for fornication, and marries another, commits adultery. Although some family relationships may fall short of the ideal, a man and a woman who fully commit themselves to each other in Christ through marriage may achieve loving unity through the guidance of the Spirit and the nurture of the church. God blesses the family and intends that its members shall assist each other toward complete maturity. Increasing family closeness is one of the earmarks of the final gospel message. Parents are to bring up their children to love and obey the Lord. By their example and their words they are to teach them that Christ is a loving, tender, and caring guide who wants them to become members of His body, the family of God which embraces both single and married persons. (Gen 2:18-25; Exod 20:12; Deut 6:5-9; Prov 22:6; Mal 4:5, 6; Matt 5:31, 32; 19:3-9, 12; Mark 10:11, 12; John 2:1-11; 1 Cor 7:7, 10, 11; 2 Cor 6:14; Eph 5:21-33; 6:1-4.)

# GUIDELINES FOR THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH IN RESPONDING TO CHANGING CULTURAL ATTITUDES REGARDING HOMOSEXUAL AND OTHER ALTERNATIVE SEXUAL PRACTICES

## THE DIVINE IDEAL OF SEXUALITY AND MARRIAGE

Issues related to human sexuality and marriage can be seen in their true light as they are viewed against the background of the divine ideal for humanity. God’s creative activity culminated in making humankind in His own image as male and female and instituting marriage. Marriage as a wonderful divine gift to humanity is a covenant-based union of the two genders physically, emotionally, and spiritually, referred to in Scripture as “one flesh.” Jesus Christ affirmed marriage to be both monogamous and heterosexual, a lifelong union of loving companionship between a man and a woman. In addition, throughout Scripture such heterosexual union in marriage is elevated as a symbol of the bond between Deity and humanity.

The harmonious relation of a man and a woman in marriage provides a microcosm of social unity that is time-honored as a core ingredient of stable societies. The Creator intended married sexuality not only to serve a unitive purpose but also to provide joy, pleasure, and physical completeness. At the same time, it is to a husband and wife whose love has enabled them to know each other in a deep sexual bond that a child may be entrusted. Their child, a living embodiment of their oneness, thrives in the atmosphere of married love and unity and has the benefit of a relationship with each of the natural parents.

While the monogamous union in marriage of a man and a woman is affirmed as the divinely ordained foundation of the family and social life and the only morally appropriate locus of intimate sexual expression,<sup>1</sup> singleness and the friendship of singles are within the divine design

as well. Scripture, however, places a distinction between acceptable conduct in friendship relations and sexual conduct in marriage.

Unfortunately, human sexuality and marriage have been corrupted by sin. Therefore, Scripture does not focus only on the positive aspects of human sexuality but also on wrong expressions of sexuality and their negative impact on people and society. It warns humans of destructive sexual behaviors such as fornication, adultery, homosexual intimacies, incest, and polygamy, (e.g., Matt 19:1-12; 1 Cor 5:1-13; 6:9-20; 7:10-16, 39; Heb 13:4; Rev 22:14, 15) and calls them to do what is good, healthy, and beneficial.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church adheres without reservation to the divine ideal of pure, honorable, and loving sexual relations within heterosexual marriage, believing that any lowering of this high view is detrimental to humanity. It also believes that the ideals of purity and beauty of marriage as designed by God need to be emphasized. Through the redemptive work of Christ, the original purpose of marriage may be recovered, and the delightful and wholesome experience of matrimony may be realized by a man and a woman who join their lives in a lifelong marriage covenant.

## **THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY**

The Seventh-day Adventist Church believes that it has been called into existence by God to proclaim the everlasting gospel to the entire world, and to invite persons everywhere to be ready for the second coming of Jesus. The Church pursues God's mission around the globe, currently teaching, preaching, caring, and serving in more than 200 nations. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has no creedal statement: it believes that its teachings rest on the authority of the Bible alone. It summarizes those beliefs, however, in a Statement of Fundamental Beliefs, currently 28 in number. Central to the Church's understanding of God's plan for ordering human society is its teaching on "Marriage and the Family."<sup>2</sup>

Because Seventh-day Adventists live, work, and minister in every part of the world, individual Seventh-day Adventists and the institutions by which the Church pursues God's mission relate to and interact with all levels of human government. The Bible instructs Christians to be obedient to the laws enacted by civil government, and wherever morally possible, Seventh-day Adventist members and Church organizations will seek to be subject to the governing authorities, even as they seek counsel about how to respond when the claims of government conflict with the truths of the Bible and the Fundamental Beliefs of the Church.

## **THE CHURCH'S RELATIONSHIP TO CIVIL LEGISLATION ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY AND ALTERNATIVE SEXUAL BEHAVIORS**

The Word of God is replete with instruction and illustration bearing on the believer's relationship to the authority and jurisdiction of civil government. Because the Seventh-day Adventist

Church values the entirety of the Word of God as its ultimate authority for truth, doctrine, and way of life, it always seeks to reflect in its teaching and practice the full message of Scripture regarding appropriate interaction with civil government. To that end, the Church periodically offers counsel to individuals, leaders, and church institutions when the claims of civil government and the teachings of the Bible appear to be in conflict. This document focuses on the growing divide between the enactments of some civil governments and the beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church about acceptable sexual behaviors.

The following principles, though not comprehensive, undergird the Church's consistent application of biblical truths to the societies and cultures in which it operates and the governments to which it responds. These principles will be especially important in framing, for a Church ministry or organization, an appropriate response to any level of civil government that may attempt to impose on the Church its perceptions of legally and morally acceptable sexual practices.

**1. All human governments exist through the provision and allowance of God.** The apostle Paul clearly instructs both individual Christians and the Church to place themselves willingly in submission to human governments that have been ordained by God to preserve God-given liberties, promote justice, preserve social order, and care for the disadvantaged (see Rom 13:1-3). Insofar as they act in concert with the values and principles articulated in the Word of God, civil governments deserve the respect and obedience of individual believers and the corporate Church. Wherever possible, individual Seventh-day Adventists and Church organizations in a given state or nation will seek by their behavior and statements to be understood as loyal citizens, participating in the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Additionally, believers are instructed to pray for those in civil authority (1 Tim 2:1, 2) so that believers may practice the virtues of God's kingdom.

**2. Although the authority of human government is derived from the authority of God, the claims and jurisdictions of human governments are never ultimately definitive for either individual believers or the Church. Both individual believers and the Church owe supreme allegiance to God Himself.** On those occasions when the claims of civil government directly conflict with and contradict the teaching of the Word of God as understood by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, both the Church and its members are bound by that same Word of God to obey its precepts rather than those of human government (Acts 5:29). This expression of a higher allegiance is specific only to the claim of government that is in contradiction to the Word of God, and does not otherwise diminish or remove the obligation of either the Church or individual believers to live in submission to civil authority on other matters.

**3. Because individual believers and the organized Church enjoy the rights and liberties given them by God and ratified by civil government, they may fully participate in the processes by which societies organize social life, provide for public and electoral order, and structure civil relationships.** This may include a clear articulation of the Church's beliefs in such things as (1) the preservation of liberty of conscience; (2) the protection of the weak and disadvantaged; (3) the responsibility of the state to promote justice and human rights; (4) the divinely ordained state of marriage between one man and one woman and the family that results from this union; and

(5) the values of God-given health principles and practices in building up the social and economic welfare of the state. Neither individual Seventh-day Adventists nor the congregations, institutions, and entities through which they engage in their God-given mission should surrender their privileges and rights as a result of opposition to their allegiance to biblical teaching. With its long history of defending religious liberty and freedom of worship around the globe, the Seventh-day Adventist Church defends the rights of all persons, of whatever faith, to follow the dictates of their conscience and to engage in the religious practices to which that faith compels them.

**4. Because the Seventh-day Adventist Church believes and practices a holistic understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ, its evangelistic, educational, publishing, medical, and other ministry organizations are integral and indivisible expressions of its fulfillment of the commission given by Jesus, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19, 20, ESV).** While Seventh-day Adventist congregations, publishing and media ministries, educational institutions, hospitals and medical centers, and ministry organizations appear to share certain similarities with other social and cultural institutions, they have historically been organized and continue to be organized on a faith and missional basis. They exist for the express purpose of communicating the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ through their multiform methods and initiatives, and to advance the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and should enjoy all the privileges and liberties accorded to the religious organization of which they are essential parts. The Seventh-day Adventist Church vigorously asserts and defends the nonseparability of its various forms of mission, and urges all civil governments to accord to each of its organizations and entities the rights of conscience and freedom of religious practice asserted in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and guaranteed in the constitutions of most world states.

**5. In their interface with civil governments and societies, both the Church and individual Seventh-day Adventists must conduct themselves as representatives of the kingdom of Christ, exhibiting His characteristics of love, humility, honesty, reconciliation, and commitment to the truths of the Word of God.** Each human being, of whatever gender, race, nationality, social class, faith, or sexual orientation, deserves to be treated with respect and dignity by the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the entities and organizations through which it pursues God’s mission. Because it defines itself as the body of Christ, who “died for us” “while we were yet sinners” (Rom 5:8), the Church holds itself to the highest standards of speech and conduct toward all human beings. Recognizing that God is the ultimate Judge of all persons, the Church believes in the opportunity of all persons to be included in the kingdom of heaven as they acknowledge and forsake their sinfulness, confess Christ as Lord, accept His righteousness in place of their own, seek to obey His commandments, and live His life of service. The Church affirms its right to describe some behaviors, ways of living, and the organizations that promote them as contrary to the Word of God. The Church is also responsible, however, to differentiate clearly between its critique of those beliefs and behaviors, and its respect for the persons expressing those beliefs and behaviors. The

Church does not condone and will not allow its public statements on matters of social concern to be characterized as contempt or verbal humiliation of those with whom it disagrees. In exercising its freedoms, the Church's public speech must exhibit the grace always seen in Jesus. All Seventh-day Adventist entities and organizations, as well as individual members of the Church, are urged to express their respect for individuals or groups of persons with whose behavior and opinions they are compelled to disagree because of allegiance to the Word of God. The Church earns the credibility to participate in difficult social and national issues by its clear identification of itself as a redemptive entity.

In light of the above principles derived from the Word of God, the Seventh-day Adventist Church seeks to offer counsel to congregations, church organizations and entities, and those who lead church organizations and entities. The complex issues surrounding civil governments' responses to the reality of homosexuality and alternative sexual practices in contemporary society underscore the importance of this counsel.

## **THE CHALLENGES OF STATE LEGISLATION**

In a growing number of nations, governments enact special legislative or judicial protection to prevent what they consider discriminatory behavior. Those protections sometimes appear to impair the religious-freedom rights of Seventh-day Adventist pastors, leaders, and Church organizations to employ persons, perform weddings, offer employment benefits, publish missional material, make public statements, and provide education or educational housing on the basis of the Seventh-day Adventist teaching about the sinfulness of sexual behaviors prohibited by Scripture.

Conversely, in a number of nations, homosexual or alternative sexual practices result in harsh penalties imposed by law. While Seventh-day Adventist institutions and members may appropriately advocate for preserving the unique and God-given institution of heterosexual marriage in their societies and legal codes, it is the position of the Church to treat those practicing homosexual or alternative sexual behaviors with the redemptive love taught and lived by Jesus.

## **THE MORAL AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOMS OF THE CHURCH**

The Seventh-day Adventist Church will encourage all its congregations, employees, ministry leaders, organizations, and entities to uphold church teachings and faith-based practices in Church membership, employment, education, and marriage ceremonies, including officiating at weddings. These teachings and faith-based practices, built upon the Bible's instructions about human sexuality, are equally applicable to heterosexual and homosexual relationships. It is inconsistent with the Church's understanding of scriptural teaching to admit into or maintain in membership persons practicing sexual behaviors incompatible with biblical teachings. Neither is it acceptable for Adventist pastors or churches to provide wedding services or facilities for same-sex couples.

In upholding these Scriptural standards, the Church relies upon the faith-based exemptions usually and customarily extended by civil government to religious organizations and their affiliated ministries to organize themselves according to their understanding of moral truth. The Church will also attempt to provide legal counsel and resources to Church leaders, organizations, and entities so that they operate in harmony with its biblical understanding of human sexuality.

Congregational leaders, Church employees, ministry leaders, and institutions are advised to review carefully the Church's existing policies with regard to membership, employment, and education to ensure that local practices are in harmony with the Church's expressed teachings about sexual behavior. Consistent expression and application of organizational policies and teachings regarding such behavior will be a key feature of maintaining the faith-based exemptions customarily allowed by civil governments.

## **FAITH-BASED DECISION MAKING IN EMPLOYMENT AND ENROLLMENT**

The Seventh-day Adventist Church asserts and reserves the right for its entities to employ individuals according to Church teaching about sexual behaviors compatible with the teaching of Scripture as understood by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. While each institution and ministry operates in its own society and legal climate, each also expresses the worldwide belief system and teachings of the global Church. The Church maintains the right of these ministries and institutions to make decisions based on the teaching of Scripture and will provide legal review of relevant law and ordinances.

Wherever possible and feasible, the Church will continue to advocate, both legislatively and in courts of law, for faith-based preferential hiring and enrollment practices for itself and its ministries.

## **THE CHURCH AND PUBLIC SPEECH**

The Church asserts the right to express its commitment to biblical truth through the communication it makes available to its members and to various publics, as well as to defend the free-speech rights of its employees to express the Church's teaching about sexual behavior in public environments, including worship services, evangelistic meetings, educational classrooms, and public forums. Church leaders accept the responsibility to keep themselves and Church employees informed about government regulations regarding acceptable speech, and to invite periodic legal review of how those regulations should affect the Church's mission. Those responsible for the Church's official communication and those who preach and teach should emphasize the importance of surrendering all behavior, including sexual behavior, to the transforming power of Jesus Christ. The standard for both published material and public statements about sexual behaviors must be that they are widely understood as both "clear and respectful," expressing biblical truth with the kindness of Jesus Himself.



## THE CHURCH AND PUBLIC SPEECH

To achieve a consistent application of a “clear and respectful” standard in its ministries, the Church urges all its ministries, including pastoral and evangelistic ministries, educational ministries, publishing and media ministries, and health and medical ministries, among others, periodically to provide training and counsel to employees who interface with the public through media and public presentations. This training should include a review of current national or community law pertaining to public speech about sexual behaviors, and examples of appropriate ways to communicate the Church’s beliefs and teachings.

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s Official Statements about “Same-Sex Unions” and “Homosexuality.”
- <sup>2</sup> Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists, “Marriage and Family,” No. 23.

# STATEMENT ON CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Child sexual abuse occurs when a person older or stronger than the child uses his or her power, authority, or position of trust to involve a child in sexual behavior or activity. Incest, a specific form of child sexual abuse, is defined as any sexual activity between a child and a parent, a sibling, an extended family member, or a step/surrogate parent.

Sexual abusers may be men or women and may be of any age, nationality, or socio-economic background. They are often men who are married with children, have respectable jobs, and may be regular churchgoers. It is common for offenders to strongly deny their abusive behavior, to refuse to see their actions as a problem, and to rationalize their behavior or place blame on something or someone else. While it is true that many abusers exhibit deeply rooted insecurities and low self-esteem, these problems should never be accepted as an excuse for sexually abusing a child. Most authorities agree that the real issue in child sexual abuse is more related to a desire for power and control than for sex.

When God created the human family, He began with a marriage between a man and a woman based on mutual love and trust. This relationship is still designed to provide the foundation for a stable, happy family in which the dignity, worth, and integrity of each family member is protected and upheld. Every child, whether male or female, is to be affirmed as a gift from God. Parents are given the privilege and responsibility of providing nurture, protection, and physical care for the children entrusted to them by God. Children should be able to honor, respect, and trust their parents and other family members without the risk of abuse.

The Bible condemns child sexual abuse in the strongest possible terms. It sees any attempt to confuse, blur, or denigrate personal, generational, or gender boundaries through sexually abusive behavior as an act of betrayal and a gross violation of personhood. It openly condemns abuses of power, authority, and responsibility because these strike at the very heart of the victims' deepest feelings about

themselves, others, and God, and shatter their capacity to love and trust. Jesus used strong language to condemn the actions of anyone who, through word or deed, causes a child to stumble.

The Adventist Christian community is not immune from child sexual abuse. We believe that the tenets of the Seventh-day Adventist faith require us to be actively involved in its prevention. We are also committed to spiritually assisting abused and abusive individuals and their families in their healing and recovery process, and to holding church professionals and church lay leaders accountable for maintaining their personal behavior as is appropriate for persons in positions of spiritual leadership and trust.

As a Church we believe our faith calls us to:

1. Uphold the principles of Christ for family relationships in which the self-respect, dignity, and purity of children are recognized as divinely mandated rights.
2. Provide an atmosphere where children who have been abused can feel safe when reporting sexual abuse and can feel that someone will listen to them.
3. Become thoroughly informed about sexual abuse and its impact upon our own church community.
4. Help ministers and lay leaders to recognize the warning signs of child sexual abuse and know how to respond appropriately when abuse is suspected or a child reports being sexually abused.
5. Establish referral relationships with professional counselors and local sexual assault agencies who can, with their professional skills, assist abuse victims and their families.
6. Create guidelines/policies at the appropriate levels to assist church leaders in:
  - a. Endeavoring to treat with fairness persons accused of sexually abusing children,
  - b. Holding abusers accountable for their actions and administering appropriate discipline.
7. Support the education and enrichment of families and family members by:
  - h. Dispelling commonly held religious and cultural beliefs which may be used to justify or cover up child sexual abuse.
  - i. Building a healthy sense of personal worth in each child which enables him or her to respect self and others.
  - j. Fostering Christlike relationships between males and females in the home and in the church.
8. Provide caring support and a faith-based redemptive ministry within the church community for abuse survivors and abusers while enabling them to access the available network of professional resources in the community.
9. Encourage the training of more family professionals to facilitate the healing and recovery process of abuse victims and perpetrators.

(The above statement is informed by principles expressed in the following scriptural passages: Gen 1:26-28; 2:18-25; Lev 18:20; 2 Sam 13:1-22; Matt 18:6-9; 1 Cor 5:1-5; Eph 6:1-4; Col 3:18-21; 1 Tim 5:5-8.)

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This statement was voted during the Spring Meeting of the General Conference Executive Committee on Tuesday, April 1, 1997, in Loma Linda, California.

# STATEMENT ON FAMILY VIOLENCE

Family violence involves an assault of any kind-verbal, physical, emotional, sexual, or active or passive neglect-that is committed by one person or persons against another within a family, whether they are married, related, living together or apart, or divorced. Current international research indicates that family violence is a global problem. It occurs between individuals of all ages and nationalities, at all socioeconomic levels, and in families from all types of religious and non-religious backgrounds. The overall rate of incidence has been found to be similar for city, suburban, and rural communities.

Family violence manifests itself in a number of ways. For example, it may be a physical attack on one's spouse. Emotional assaults such as verbal threats, episodes of rage, depreciation of character, and unrealistic demands for perfection are also abuse. It may take the form of physical coercion and violence within the marital sexual relationship, or the threat of violence through the use of intimidating verbal or nonverbal behavior. It includes behavior such as incest and the mistreatment or neglect of underage children by a parent or another guardian that results in injury or harm. Violence against the elderly may be seen in physical, psychological, sexual, verbal, material, and medical abuse or neglect.

The Bible clearly indicates that the distinguishing mark of Christian believers is the quality of their human relationships in the church and in the family. It is in the spirit of Christ to love and accept, to seek to affirm and build others up, rather than to abuse or tear one another down. There is no room among Christ's followers for tyrannical control and the abuse of power or authority. Motivated by their love for Christ, His disciples are called to show respect and concern for the welfare of others, to accept males and females as equals, and to acknowledge that every person has a right to respect and dignity. Failure to relate to others in this way violates their personhood and devalues human beings created and redeemed by God.

The apostle Paul refers to the church as "the household of faith" which functions as an extended family, offering acceptance, understanding, and comfort to all, especially to those who are hurting or disadvantaged. Scripture portrays the church as a family in which personal and spiritual growth can occur as feelings of betrayal, rejection, and grief give way to feelings of forgiveness, trust, and wholeness. The Bible also speaks of the Christian's personal responsibility to protect his or her body temple from desecration because it is the dwelling place of God.

Regrettably, family violence occurs in many Christian homes. It can never be condoned. It severely affects the lives of all involved and often results in long term distorted perceptions of God, self, and others.

It is our belief that the Church has a responsibility-

1. To care for those involved in family violence and to respond to their needs by:
  - b. Listening to and accepting those suffering from abuse, loving and affirming them as persons of value and worth.
  - c. Highlighting the injustices of abuse and speaking out in defense of victims both within the community of faith and in society.
  - d. Providing a caring, supportive ministry to families affected by violence and abuse, seeking to enable both victims and perpetrators to access counseling with Seventh-day Adventist professionals where available or other professional resources in the community.
  - e. Encouraging the training and placement of licensed Seventh-day Adventist professional services for both church members and the surrounding communities.
  - f. Offering a ministry of reconciliation when the perpetrator's repentance makes possible the contemplation of forgiveness and restoration in relationships. Repentance always includes acceptance of full responsibility for the wrongs committed, willingness to make restitution in every way possible, and changes in behavior to eliminate the abuse.
  - g. Focusing the light of the gospel on the nature of husband-wife, parent-child, and other close relationships, and empowering individuals and families to grow toward God's ideals in their lives together.
  - h. Guarding against the ostracism of either victims or perpetrators within the family or church community, while firmly holding perpetrators responsible for their actions.
2. To strengthen family life by:
  - c. Providing family life education which is grace-oriented and includes a biblical understanding of the mutuality, equality, and respect indispensable to Christian relationships.

- d. Increasing understanding of the factors that contribute to family violence.
  - e. Developing ways to prevent abuse and violence and the recurring cycle often observed within families and across generations.
  - f. Rectifying commonly held religious and cultural beliefs which may be used to justify or cover up family violence. For example, while parents are instructed by God to redemptively correct their children, this responsibility does not give license for the use of harsh, punitive disciplinary measures.
3. To accept our moral responsibility to be alert and responsive to abuse within the families of our congregations and our communities, and to declare that such abusive behavior is a violation of Seventh-day Adventist Christian standards. Any indications or reports of abuse must not be minimized but seriously considered. For church members to remain indifferent and unresponsive is to condone, perpetuate, and possibly extend family violence.

If we are to live as children of the light, we must illuminate the darkness where family violence occurs in our midst. We must care for one another, even when it would be easier to remain uninvolved.

(The above statement is informed by principles expressed in the following scriptural passages: Ex 20:12; Matt 7:12; 20:25-28; Mark 9:33-45; John 13:34; Rom 12:10, 13; 1 Cor 6:19; Gal 3:28; Eph 5:2, 3, 21-27; 6:1-4; Col 3:12-14; 1 Thess 5:11; 1 Tim 5:5-8.)

# STATEMENT ON HOME AND FAMILY

The health and prosperity of society is directly related to the well-being of its constituent parts—the family unit. Today, as probably never before, the family is in trouble. Social commentators decry the disintegration of modern family life. The traditional Christian concept of marriage between one man and one woman is under assault. The Seventh-day Adventist Church, in this time of family crisis, encourages every family member to strengthen his or her spiritual dimension and family relationship through mutual love, honor, respect, and responsibility.

The church's Bible-based Fundamental Belief No. 22 states the marital relationship "is to reflect the love, sanctity, closeness, and permanence of the relationship between Christ and His church. ... Although some family relationships may fall short of the ideal, marriage partners who fully commit themselves to each other in Christ may achieve loving unity through the guidance of the Spirit and the nurture of the church. God blesses the family and intends that its members shall assist each other toward complete maturity. Parents are to bring up their children to love and obey the Lord. By their example and their words they are to teach them that Christ is a loving disciplinarian, ever tender and caring, who wants them to become members of His body, the family of God."

Ellen G. White, one of the founders of the church, stated: "The work of parents underlies every other. Society is composed of families, and is what the heads of families make it. Out of the heart are the 'issues of life' (Prov.4:23); and the heart of the community, of the church, and of the nation is the household. The well-being of society, the success of the church, the prosperity of the nation, depend upon home influences." -*The Ministry of Healing*, p. 349.

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This public statement was released by the General Conference president, Neal C. Wilson, after consultation with the 16 world vice presidents of Seventh-day Adventists, on June 27, 1985, at the General Conference session in New Orleans, Louisiana.

# STATEMENT ON HOMOSEXUALITY

The Seventh-day Adventist Church recognizes that every human being is valuable in the sight of God, and we seek to minister to all men and women in the spirit of Jesus. We also believe that by God's grace and through the encouragement of the community of faith, an individual may live in harmony with the principles of God's Word.

Seventh-day Adventists believe that sexual intimacy belongs only within the marital relationship of a man and a woman. This was the design established by God at creation. The Scriptures declare: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Gen 2:24, NIV). Throughout Scripture this heterosexual pattern is affirmed. The Bible makes no accommodation for homosexual activity or relationships. Sexual acts outside the circle of a heterosexual marriage are forbidden (Lev 18:5-23, 26; Lev 20:7-21; Rom 1:24-27; 1 Cor 6:9-11). Jesus Christ reaffirmed the divine creation intent: "'Haven't you read,' he replied, 'that at the beginning the Creator "made them male and female," and said, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh?" So they are no longer two, but one"' (Matt 19:5, NIV). For these reasons Seventh-day Adventists are opposed to homosexual practices and relationships.

Jesus affirmed the dignity of all human beings and reached out compassionately to persons and families suffering the consequences of sin. He offered caring ministry and words of solace to struggling people, while differentiating His love for sinners from His clear teaching about sinful practices. As His disciples, Seventh-day Adventists endeavor to follow the Lord's instruction and example, living a life of Christ-like compassion and faithfulness.

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This statement was voted during the Annual Council of the General Conference Executive Committee on Sunday, October 3, 1999 in Silver Spring, Maryland. Revised by the General Conference Executive Committee, October 17, 2012.



# STATEMENT ON HUMAN RELATIONS

Seventh-day Adventists deplore and seek to combat all forms of discrimination based on race, tribe, nationality, color, or gender. We believe that every person was created in the image of God, who made all nations of one blood (Acts 17:26). We endeavor to carry on the reconciling ministry of Jesus Christ, who died for the whole world so that in Him “there is neither Jew nor Greek” (Gal. 3:28). Any form of racism eats the heart out of the Christian gospel.

One of the most troubling aspects of our times is the manifestation of racism and tribalism in many societies, sometimes with violence, always with the denigration of men and women. As a worldwide body in more than 200 nations, Seventh-day Adventists seek to manifest acceptance, love, and respect toward all, and to spread this healing message throughout society.

The equality of all people is one of the tenets of our church. Our Fundamental Belief No. 13 states: “In Christ we are a new creation; distinctions of race, culture, learning and nationality, and differences between high and low, rich and poor, male and female, must not be divisive among us. We are all equal in Christ, who by one Spirit has bonded us into one fellowship with Him, and with one another; we are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation.”

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This statement was approved and voted by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Administrative Committee (ADCOM) and was released by the Office of the President, Robert S. Folkenberg, at the General Conference session in Utrecht, the Netherlands, June 29-July 8, 1995.

# STATEMENT ON RACISM

One of the odious evils of our day is racism, the belief or practice that views or treats certain racial groups as inferior and therefore justifiably the object of domination, discrimination, and segregation.

While the sin of racism is an age-old phenomenon based on ignorance, fear, estrangement, and false pride, some of its ugliest manifestations have taken place in our time. Racism and irrational prejudices operate in a vicious circle. Racism is among the worst of ingrained prejudices that characterize sinful human beings. Its consequences are generally more devastating because racism easily becomes permanently institutionalized and legalized and in its extreme manifestations can lead to systematic persecution and even genocide.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church deplors all forms of racism, including the political policy of apartheid with its enforced segregation and legalized discrimination.

Seventh-day Adventists want to be faithful to the reconciling ministry assigned to the Christian church. As a worldwide community of faith, the Seventh-day Adventist Church wishes to witness to and exhibit in her own ranks the unity and love that transcend racial differences and overcome past alienation between races.

Scripture plainly teaches that every person was created in the image of God, who “made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth” (Acts 17:26). Racial discrimination is an offense against our fellow human beings, who were created in God’s image. In Christ “there is neither Jew nor Greek” (Gal. 3:28). Therefore, racism is really a heresy and in

essence a form of idolatry, for it limits the fatherhood of God by denying the brotherhood of all mankind and by exalting the superiority of one's own race.

The standard for Seventh-day Adventist Christians is acknowledged in the church's Bible-based Fundamental Belief No. 13, "Unity in the Body of Christ." Here it is pointed out: "In Christ we are a new creation; distinctions of race, culture, learning, and nationality, and differences between high and low, rich and poor, male and female, must not be divisive among us. We are all equal in Christ, who by one Spirit has bonded us into one fellowship with Him and with one another; we are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation."

Any other approach destroys the heart of the Christian gospel.

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This public statement was released by the General Conference president, Neal C. Wilson, after consultation with the 16 world vice presidents of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, on June 27, 1985, at the General Conference session in New Orleans, Louisiana.

# STATEMENT ON SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

In His infinite love and wisdom God created mankind, both male and female, and in so doing based human society on the firm foundation of loving homes and families.

It is Satan's purpose, however, to pervert every good thing; and the perversion of the best inevitably leads to that which is worst. Under the influence of passion unrestrained by moral and religious principle, the association of the sexes has, to a deeply disturbing extent, degenerated into license and abuse which results in bondage. With the aid of many films, television, video, radio programs, and printed materials, the world is being steered on a course to new depths of shame and depravity. Not only is the basic structure of society being greatly damaged but also the breakdown of the family fosters other gross evils. The results in distorted lives of children and youth are distressing and evoke our pity, and the effects are not only disastrous but also cumulative.

These evils have become more open and constitute a serious and growing threat to the ideals and purposes of the Christian home. Sexual practices which are contrary to God's expressed will are adultery and premarital sex, as well as obsessive sexual behavior. Sexual abuse of spouses, sexual abuse of children, incest, homosexual practices (gay and lesbian), and bestiality are among the obvious perversions of God's original plan. As the intent of clear passages of Scripture (see Ex 20:14; Lev 18:22,23,29 and 20:13; Matthew 5:27,28; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10; Rom 1:20-32) is denied and as their warnings are rejected in exchange for human opinions, much uncertainty and confusion prevail. This is what Satan desires. He has always attempted to cause people to forget that when God as Creator made Adam, He also created Eve to be Adam's female companion ("male and female he created them" Gen 1:24 NEB). In spite of the clear moral standards set forth in God's Word for relationships between man and woman, the world today is witnessing a resurgence of the perversions and depravity that marked ancient civilizations.

The degrading results of the obsession of this age with sex and the pursuit of sensual pleasure are clearly described in the Word of God. But Christ came to destroy the works of the devil and reestablish the right relationship of human beings with each other and with their Creator. Thus, though fallen in Adam and captive to sin, those who turn to Christ in repentance receive full pardon and choose the better way, the way to complete restoration. By means of the cross, the power of the Holy Spirit in the “inner man,” and the nurturing ministry of the Church, all may be freed from the grip of perversions and sinful practices.

An acceptance of God’s free grace inevitably leads the individual believer to the kind of life and conduct that “will add luster to the doctrine of our God and Saviour” (Titus 2:10 NEB). It will also lead the corporate church to firm and loving discipline of the member whose conduct misrepresents the Saviour and distorts and lowers the true standards of Christian life and behavior.

The Church recognizes the penetrating truth and powerful motivations of Paul’s words to Titus: “For the grace of God has dawned upon the world with healing for all mankind; and by it we are disciplined to renounce godless ways and worldly desires, and to live a life of temperance, honesty, and godliness in the present age, looking forward to the happy fulfilment of our hope when the splendor of our great God and Saviour Christ Jesus will appear. He it is who sacrificed himself for us, to set us free from all wickedness and to make us a pure people marked out for his own, eager to do good.”—Titus 2:11-14, NEB. (See also 2 Peter 3:11-14.)

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This statement was approved and voted by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Executive Committee at the Annual Council session in Washington, D.C., October 12, 1987.

# STATEMENT ON THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF UNBORN LIFE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR ABORTION

Human beings are created in the image of God. Part of the gift that God has given us as humans is procreation, the ability to participate in creation along with the Author of life. This sacred gift should always be valued and treasured. In God's original plan every pregnancy should be the result of the expression of love between a man and a woman committed to each other in marriage. A pregnancy should be wanted, and each baby should be loved, valued, and nurtured even before birth. Unfortunately, since the entrance of sin, Satan has made intentional efforts to mar the image of God by defacing all of God's gifts—including the gift of procreation. Consequently, individuals are at times faced with difficult dilemmas and decisions regarding a pregnancy.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is committed to the teachings and principles of the Holy Scriptures which express God's values on life and provide guidance for prospective mothers and fathers, medical personnel, churches, and all believers in matters of faith, doctrine, ethical behavior, and lifestyle. The Church while not being the conscience of individual believers has the duty to convey the principles and teachings of the Word of God.

This statement affirms the sanctity of life and presents biblical principles bearing on abortion. As used in this statement, abortion is defined as any action aimed at the termination of a pregnancy and does not include the spontaneous termination of a pregnancy, known also as a miscarriage.

## BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES AND TEACHINGS RELATING TO ABORTION

As the practice of abortion must be weighed in the light of Scripture, the following biblical principles and teachings provide guidance for the community of faith and individuals affected by such difficult choices:

**1. God upholds the value and sacredness of human life.** Human life is of the greatest value to God. Having created humanity in His image (Genesis 1:27; 2:7), God has a personal interest in people. God loves them and communicates with them, and they in turn can love and communicate with Him.

Life is a gift of God, and God is the Giver of life. In Jesus is life (John 1:4). He has life in Himself (John 5:26). He is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25; 14:6). He provides abundant life (John 10:10). Those who have the Son have life (1 John 5:12). He is also the Sustainer of life (Acts 17:25-28; Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:1-3), and the Holy Spirit is described as the Spirit of life (Romans 8:2). God cares deeply for His creation and especially for humankind.

Furthermore, the importance of human life is made clear by the fact that, after the Fall (Genesis 3), God “gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). While God could have abandoned and terminated sinful humanity, He opted for life. Consequently, Christ’s followers will be raised from the dead and will live in face-to-face communion with God (John 11:25-26; 1 Thessalonians 4:15-16; Revelation 21:3). Thus, human life is of inestimable value. This is true for all stages of human life: the unborn, children of various ages, adolescents, adults, and seniors—independent of physical, mental, and emotional capacities. It is also true for all humans regardless of sex, ethnicity, social status, religion, and whatever else may distinguish them. Such an understanding of the sanctity of life gives inviolable and equal value to each and every human life and requires it to be treated with the utmost respect and care.

**2. God considers the unborn child as human life.** Prenatal life is precious in God’s sight, and the Bible describes God’s knowledge of people before they were conceived. “Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them” (Psalm 139:16). In certain cases, God directly guided prenatal life. Samson was to “be a Nazirite to God from the womb” (Judges 13:5). The servant of God is “called from the womb” (Isaiah 49:1, 5). Jeremiah was already chosen as a prophet before his birth (Jeremiah 1:5), as was Paul (Galatians 1:15), and John the Baptist was to “be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb” (Luke 1:15). Of Jesus the angel Gabriel explained to Mary: “therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). In His Incarnation Jesus Himself experienced the human prenatal period and was recognized as the Messiah and Son of God soon after His conception (Luke 1:40-45). The Bible already attributes to the unborn child joy (Luke 1:44) and even rivalry (Genesis 25:21-23). Those not-yet-born have a firm place with God (Job 10:8-12; 31:13-15). Biblical law shows a strong regard for protecting human life and considers harm to or the loss of a baby or mother as a result of a violent act a serious issue (Exodus 21:22-23).

**3. *The will of God regarding human life is expressed in the Ten Commandments and explained by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.*** The Decalogue was given to God's covenant people and the world to guide their lives and protect them. Its commandments are unchanging truths which should be cherished, respected, and obeyed. The Psalmist praises God's law (e.g., Psalm 119), and Paul calls it holy, righteous, and good (Romans 7:12). The sixth commandment states: "You shall not kill" (Exodus 20:13), which calls for the preservation of human life. The principle to preserve life enshrined in the sixth commandment places abortion within its scope. Jesus reinforced the commandment not to kill in Matthew 5:21-22. Life is protected by God. It is not measured by individuals' abilities or their usefulness, but by the value that God's creation and sacrificial love has placed on it. Personhood, human value, and salvation are not earned or merited but graciously granted by God.

**4. *God is the Owner of life, and human beings are His stewards.*** Scripture teaches that God owns everything (Psalm 50:10-12). God has a dual claim on humans. They are His because He is their Creator and therefore He owns them (Psalm 139:13-16). They are also His because He is their Redeemer and has bought them with the highest possible price—His own life (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). This means that all human beings are stewards of whatever God has entrusted to them, including their own lives, the lives of their children, and the unborn.

The stewardship of life also includes carrying responsibilities which in some ways limit their choices (1 Corinthians 9:19-22). Since God is the Giver and Owner of life, human beings do not have ultimate control over themselves and should seek to preserve life wherever possible. The principle of the stewardship of life obligates the community of believers to guide, support, care for, and love those facing decisions about pregnancies.

**5. *The Bible teaches care for the weak and the vulnerable.*** God Himself cares for those who are disadvantaged and oppressed and protects them. He "shows no partiality nor takes a bribe. He administers justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing" (Deuteronomy 10:17-18, cf. Psalm 82:3-4; James 1:27). He does not hold children accountable for the sins of their fathers (Ezekiel 18:20). God expects the same of His children. They are called to help vulnerable people and ease their lot (Psalm 41:1; 82:3-4; Acts 20:35). Jesus speaks of the least of His brothers (Matthew 25:40), for whom His followers are responsible, and of the little ones who should not be despised or lost (Matthew 18:10-14). The very youngest, namely the unborn, should be counted among them.

**6. *God's grace promotes life in a world marred by sin and death.*** It is God's nature to protect, preserve, and sustain life. In addition to the providence of God over His creation (Psalm 103:19; Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:3), the Bible acknowledges the wide-ranging, devastating, and degrading effects of sin on the creation, including on human bodies. In Romans 8:20-24 Paul describes the impact of the Fall as subjecting the creation to futility. Consequently, in rare



and extreme cases, human conception may produce pregnancies with fatal prospects and/or acute, life-threatening birth anomalies that present individuals and couples with exceptional dilemmas. Decisions in such cases may be left to the conscience of the individuals involved and their families. These decisions should be well-informed and guided by the Holy Spirit and the biblical view of life outlined above. God's grace promotes and protects life. Individuals in these challenging situations may come to Him in sincerity and find direction, comfort, and peace in the Lord.

## IMPLICATIONS

The Seventh-day Adventist Church considers abortion out of harmony with God's plan for human life. It affects the unborn, the mother, the father, immediate and extended family members, the church family, and society with long-term consequences for all. Believers aim to trust God and follow His will for them, knowing He has their best interests in mind.

While not condoning abortion, the Church and its members are called to follow the example of Jesus, being "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14), to (1) create an atmosphere of true love and provide grace-filled, biblical pastoral care and loving support to those facing difficult decisions regarding abortion; (2) enlist the help of well-functioning and committed families and educate them to provide care for struggling individuals, couples, and families; (3) encourage church members to open their homes to those in need, including single-parents, parentless children, and adoptive or foster care children; (4) care deeply for and support in various ways pregnant women who decide to keep their unborn children; and (5) provide emotional and spiritual support to those who have aborted a child for various reasons or were forced to have an abortion and may be hurting physically, emotionally, and/or spiritually.

The issue of abortion presents enormous challenges, but it gives individuals and the Church the opportunity to be what they aspire to be, the fellowship of brothers and sisters, the community of believers, the family of God, revealing His immeasurable and unfailing love.

# STATEMENT ON THE NURTURE AND PROTECTION OF CHILDREN

Seventh-day Adventists place a high value on children. In the light of the Bible they are seen as precious gifts from God entrusted to the care of parents, family, community of faith and society-at-large. Children possess enormous potential for making positive contributions to the Church and to society. Attention to their care, protection and development is extremely important.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church reaffirms and extends its longstanding efforts to nurture and safeguard children and youth from persons—known and unknown—whose actions perpetrate any form of abuse and violence against them and/or sexually exploit them. Jesus modeled the kind of respect, nurture, and protection children should be able to expect from adults entrusted with their care. Some of His strongest words of reproof were directed toward those who would harm them. Because of the trusting nature and dependence of children upon older and wiser adults and the life-changing consequences when this trust is breached, children require vigilant protection.

## REDEMPTIVE CORRECTION

The Seventh-day Adventist Church places a priority on church-based parent education that helps parents develop the skills necessary for a redemptive approach to correction. Many

children experience harsh punishment in the name of a biblical approach to discipline. Correction characterized by severe, punitive, dictatorial control often leads to resentment and rebellion. Such harsh discipline is also associated with heightened risk for physical and psychological harm to children as well as increased likelihood the youth will resort to coercion and violence in resolving their differences with others. By contrast, examples from Scripture as well as a large body of research confirm the effectiveness of more gentle forms of discipline that allow children to learn through reasoning and experiencing the consequences of their choices. Such milder measures have been demonstrated to increase the likelihood children will make life-affirming choices and espouse parental values as they mature.

### **MAKING CHURCH A SAFE PLACE FOR CHILDREN**

The Church also takes seriously its responsibility to minimize the risk for child sexual abuse and violence against children in the congregational setting. First and foremost, church leaders and members must themselves live by a strict code of ethics that precludes even the appearance of evil as regards the exploitation of minors for the gratification of adult desires. Other practical measures toward making church a safe place for children include attention to the safety of the church facility and its surroundings and the careful supervision and monitoring of children and their environment during all church-related activities. Education regarding what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate interaction between adults and children, the warning signs of abuse and violence, and the specific steps to be followed should inappropriate behavior be reported or suspected are vitally important. Pastors and church leaders who are visible and approachable play an important role in prevention as well as in responding well to the needs of children whose safety may have been jeopardized. Regular updates are needed regarding their moral and legal responsibility to report child abuse to appropriate civil authorities. The designation of trained personnel and specific protocols at wider levels of Church organization will help to ensure appropriate action and follow-through when abuse is reported within the church setting.

Because of the complex nature of the problem of child sexual abuse and violence against children, intervention and treatment of perpetrators requires resources beyond the scope of ministry provided by the local church. However, the presence of a known perpetrator in a congregation calls for the highest levels of vigilance. While perpetrators should be held fully responsible for their own behavior, the supervision of persons with a history of inappropriate behavior is necessary to ensure that such persons maintain appropriate distance and refrain from all contact with children during church-related activities. Provision for alternative opportunities for perpetrators to grow spiritually in settings where children are not present greatly enhances child protection.

## **FOSTERING EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL HEALING**

Children who have been personally victimized or who have witnessed disturbing events need the care of adults who treat them with sensitivity and understanding. Practical support that helps children and families maintain stability in the midst of turmoil empowers victims and their families and promotes healing. The Church's commitment to breaking the silence frequently associated with child sexual abuse and violence, its efforts toward advocacy and justice for all victims, and deliberate action to safeguard children from all forms of abuse and violence will contribute much toward the emotional and spiritual recovery of all concerned. The Church regards the nurture and protection of children as a sacred trust.

(This statement has been informed by the principles expressed in the following biblical passages: Lev. 18:6; 2 Sam. 13:1-11; 1 Kings 17:17-23; Ps. 9: 9, 12, 16-18; 11:5-7; 22:24; 34:18; 127:3-5; 128:3-4; Prov. 31:8-9; Is. 1:16-17; Jer. 22:3; Matt. 18:1-6; 21:9, 15-16; Mark 9:37; 10:13-16; Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21; 1Tim. 5:8; Heb. 13:3.)

# STATEMENT ON TRANSGENDERISM

The increasing awareness of the needs and challenges that transgender men and women experience and the rise of transgender issues to social prominence worldwide raise important questions not only for those affected by the transgender phenomenon but also for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. While the struggles and challenges of those identifying as transgender people have some elements in common with the struggles of all human beings, we recognize the uniqueness of their situation and the limitation of our knowledge in specific instances. Yet, we believe that Scripture provides principles for guidance and counsel to transgender people and the Church, transcending human conventions and culture.

## THE TRANSGENDER PHENOMENON

In modern society, gender identity typically denotes “the public (and usually legally recognized) lived role as boy or girl, man or woman,” while sex refers “to the biological indicators of male and female.”<sup>1</sup> Gender identification usually aligns with a person’s biological sex at birth. However, misalignment may happen at the physical and/or mental-emotional levels.

On the physical level ambiguity in genitalia may result from anatomical and physiological abnormalities so that it cannot be clearly established whether a child is male or female. This ambiguity of anatomical sexual differentiation is often called hermaphroditism or intersexualism.<sup>2</sup>

On the mental-emotional level misalignment occurs with transgender people whose sexual anatomy is clearly male or female but who identify with the opposite gender of their biological sex.

They may describe themselves as being trapped in a wrong body. Transgenderism, formerly clinically diagnosed as “gender identity disorder” and now termed “gender dysphoria,” may be understood as a general term to describe the variety of ways individuals interpret and express their gender identity differently from those who determine gender on the basis of biological sex.<sup>3</sup> “Gender dysphoria is manifested in a variety of ways, including strong desires to be treated as the other gender or to be rid of one’s sex characteristics, or a strong conviction that one has feelings and reactions typical of the other gender.”<sup>4</sup>

Due to contemporary trends to reject the biblical gender binary (male and female) and replace it with a growing spectrum of gender types, certain choices triggered by the transgender condition have come to be regarded as normal and accepted in contemporary culture. However, the desire to change or live as a person of another gender may result in biblically inappropriate lifestyle choices. Gender dysphoria may, for instance, result in cross-dressing,<sup>5</sup> sex reassignment surgery, and the desire to have a marital relationship with a person of the same biological sex. On the other hand, transgender people may suffer silently, living a celibate life or being married to a spouse of the opposite sex.

## **BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES RELATING TO SEXUALITY AND THE TRANSGENDER PHENOMENON**

As the transgender phenomenon must be evaluated by Scripture, the following biblical principles and teachings may help the community of faith relate to people affected by gender dysphoria in a biblical and Christ-like way:

1. God created humanity as two persons who are respectively identified as male and female in terms of gender. The Bible inextricably ties gender to biological sex (Gen 1:27; 2:22-24) and does not make a distinction between the two. The Word of God affirms complementarity as well as clear distinctions between male and female in creation. The Genesis creation account is foundational to all questions of human sexuality.
2. From a biblical perspective, the human being is a psychosomatic unity. For example, Scripture repeatedly calls the entire human being a soul (Gen 2:7; Jer 13:17; 52:28-30; Ezek 18:4; Acts 2:41; 1 Cor 15:45), a body (Eph 5:28; Rom 12:1-2; Rev 18:13), flesh (1 Pet 1:24), and spirit (2 Tim 4:22; 1 John 4:1-3). Thus, the Bible does not endorse dualism in the sense of a separation between one’s body and one’s sense of sexuality. In addition, an immortal part of humans is not envisioned in Scripture because God alone possesses immortality (1 Tim 6:14-16) and will bestow it on those who believe in Him at the first resurrection (1 Cor 15:51-54). Thus, a human being is also meant to be an undivided sexual entity, and sexual identity cannot be independent from one’s body. According to Scripture, our gender identity, as designed by God, is determined by our biological sex at birth (Gen 1:27; 5:1-2; Ps 139:13-14; Mark 10:6).

3. Scripture acknowledges, however, that due to the Fall (Gen 3:6-19) the whole human being — that is, our mental, physical, and spiritual faculties — are affected by sin (Jer 17:9; Rom 3:9; 7:14-23; 8:20-23; Gal 5:17) and need to be renewed by God (Rom 12:2). Our emotions, feelings, and perceptions are not fully reliable indicators of God's designs, ideals, and truth (Prov 14:12; 16:25). We need guidance from God through Scripture to determine what is in our best interest and live according to His will (2 Tim 3:16).
4. The fact that some individuals claim a gender identity incompatible with their biological sex reveals a serious dichotomy. This brokenness or distress, whether felt or not, is an expression of the damaging effects of sin on humans and may have a variety of causes. Although gender dysphoria is not intrinsically sinful, it may result in sinful choices. It is another indicator that, on a personal level, humans are involved in the great controversy.
5. As long as transgender people are committed to ordering their lives according to the biblical teachings on sexuality and marriage they can be members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The Bible clearly and consistently identifies any sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage as sin (Matt 5:28, 31-32; 1 Tim 1:8-11; Heb 13:4). Alternative sexual lifestyles are sinful distortions of God's good gift of sexuality (Rom 1:21-28; 1 Cor 6:9-10).
6. Because the Bible regards humans as wholistic entities and does not differentiate between biological sex and gender identity, the Church strongly cautions transgender people against sex reassignment surgery and against marriage, if they have undergone such a procedure. From the biblical wholistic viewpoint of human nature, a full transition from one gender to another and the attainment of an integrated sexual identity cannot be expected in the case of sex reassignment surgery.
7. The Bible commands followers of Christ to love everyone. Created in the image of God, they must be treated with dignity and respect. This includes transgender people. Acts of ridicule, abuse, or bullying towards transgender people are incompatible with the biblical commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31).
8. The Church as the community of Jesus Christ is meant to be a refuge and place of hope, care, and understanding to all who are perplexed, suffering, struggling, and lonely, for "a bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench" (Matt 12:20). All people are invited to attend the Seventh-day Adventist Church and enjoy the fellowship of its believers. Those who are members can fully participate in church life as long as they embrace the message, mission, and values of the Church.
9. The Bible proclaims the good news that sexual sins committed by heterosexuals, homosexuals, transgender people, or others can be forgiven, and lives can be transformed through faith in Jesus Christ (1 Cor 6:9-11).

10. Those who experience incongruity between their biological sex and gender identity are encouraged to follow biblical principles in dealing with their distress. They are invited to reflect on God's original plan of purity and sexual fidelity. Belonging to God, all are called to honor Him with their bodies and their lifestyle choices (1 Cor 6:19). With all believers, transgender people are encouraged to wait on God and are offered the fullness of divine compassion, peace, and grace in anticipation of Christ's soon return when all true followers of Christ will be completely restored to God's ideal.

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th ed. (DSM-5TM), edited by the American Psychiatric Association (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), 451.
- <sup>2</sup> Those born with ambiguous genitalia may or may not benefit from corrective surgical treatment.
- <sup>3</sup> See DSM-5TM, 451-459.
- <sup>4</sup> This sentence is part of a succinct summary of gender dysphoria provided to introduce DSM-5TM that was published in 2013 (accessed April 11, 2017).
- <sup>5</sup> Cross-dressing, also referred to as transvestite behavior, is prohibited in Deuteronomy 22:5.





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**Celebrate Creation: Marriage, Family and the Sabbath** is for pastors and ministry leaders in their work with families in and out of the church. We hope the resources found in this volume will help develop healthier families, which invariably result in healthier churches that can reach the world with power and joy to help hasten the coming of Jesus Christ.

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