

# Look Before You Leap: The Crucial Role of Pre-Marital Counselling

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The more time I spend working with couples in crisis, the more I feel compelled to 'beat the drum' for rigorous premarital counselling for those considering marriage. A little gentle probing into the history of couples experiencing difficulties often reveals that pre-marital counselling was either non-existent or inadequate.

Effective premarital guidance illuminates the biblical principles undergirding Christian marriage; prepares couples for the transition into married life; enhances relational skills; provides the opportunity to evaluate the decision to marry and helps to develop confidence and trust in the pastor/counsellor and the counselling process.

Bearing in mind that the best marriage is still the union of two imperfect people, it is necessary that couples learn at the pre-marital stage which flaws in their partner they can accommodate and which they cannot. However, too many couples are so caught up riding the roller-coaster of emotional 'love' that they often fail to ask the cold hard questions necessary to evaluate themselves and their partners as candidates for marriage. Ellen White counsels, "Those who are not willing to adapt themselves to each other's disposition, so as to avoid unpleasant differences and contentions, should not take the step" (*The Adventist Home*, 84). Couples make a potentially fatal error when they enter marriage with the intention or hope that their partner will change.

More often than not, the computing acronym WYSIWYG (what-you-see-is-what-you-get) applies. Because emotions have such a powerful influence on the way courting couples relate, it is vitally important for them to engage in an objective process to clarify their experience at the earliest opportunity. The Bible warns, "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, who can know it?" Jeremiah 17:9. This is especially true in matters of 'love'.

In his book *The Road Less Travelled*, the author M Scott Peck, makes the distinction between being 'in love' and 'real love.' Too many confuse the euphoric, involuntary, obsessive, effortless, self-centred, temporary, delusional experience of being 'in love' with what Peck describes as, "The will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth (p 81). Real love is characterised by the biblical concept of agape love. That love which operates out of principle rather than emotion. While romance is a vital component of every marriage, being 'in love' must give way to mature agape love. A rigorous pre-marital process enables couples to measure their experience against real love as defined in Galatians 5:22 and 1 Corinthians 13.

As a church we do a disservice to couples when we bend over backwards to facilitate their 'whistles and bells' weddings, yet fail to hold them accountable to each other and God through a thorough premarital counselling process. Ellen White comments that, "Marriage, in a majority of cases, is a most galling yoke. There are thousands that are mated but not matched" (*The Adventist Home* p 44). We can

avoid much heartache by assisting couples to make spiritually mature choices at the pre-marital stage so that their marriages may be characterised by the sentiment that, the warmth of true friendship that binds the hearts of husband and wife [may be] . . . a foretaste of heaven (ibid.56).