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The Spiritual Foundation for Marriage

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The Spiritual Foundation for Marriage

Ronald and Peggy Hawkins

The LORD witnessed the vows you and your wife made to each other on your wedding day when you were young.

Malachi 2:14 (NLT)

The superintendent of construction, wearing his hard hat, looked strangely out of place in our offices. Carrying his hefty blueprints, he had come to our office to explain why he was systematically dismantling major segments of the building in which our group worked every day. Apologizing for the dust, noise, and inconvenience, he promised we would be delighted with the finished product. He went on to explain, "A lot of interior and foundational work will be required before we can go skyward with the three-story addition."

After he left, I reflected on what he had said to us, and two things stood out for me. First, his massive set of blueprints assured us that every move he made was aimed at achieving preplanned outcomes. Second, he understood that before they could go higher, it would be necessary to complete a significant amount of interior work on the foundation.

As I prepared to write this chapter, I thought about how we as Christian couples face challenges similar to those of the superintendent. We, too, have been given a set of blueprints. I believe the Bible pro-

vides us with adequate directions for putting in place the spiritual foundations necessary for going skyward with our marriages.

Building a Spiritual Foundation for Marriage

Couples today face some unique challenges as they seek to lay down solid spiritual foundations for their marriages. Our culture has become increasingly committed to a quest for individual development in every facet of life, including marriage. This radical individualism has contributed to a divorce rate that, even in Christian marriages, now exceeds 50 percent, in spite of the fact that God has provided us with the resources that are necessary for us to swim upstream and be countercultural. The good news is that we can be guided by this biblical blueprint to establish the spiritual foundation that will keep us in step with God's purposes for marriage and contribute to the production of a rewarding intimacy. Let's review the plans.

Give Attention to Salvation

Adam and Eve were created in God's image and were given dominion over all of God's creation. God provided them with all that was necessary to rule and relate well. Each possessed a sense of great value to the other, and they were wonderfully constituted by their Creator Father to make unique contributions to the fulfillment of his purposes. (See Gen. 1:26–28; 2:18–25.) But the team rebelled! Satan maintained that God was an oppressive dictator, Adam and Eve believed the lie, and devastating consequences followed their abandonment of the Creator's directives. (See Gen. 3:1–24; Rom. 5:12–21.)

Guidance from the image of God in the core of human personality was replaced by the guidance of death and darkness. (See Eph. 4:17–24.) As Adam and Eve's descendants, we are without the proper resources to begin the work of building spiritual foundations for our marriages. (See Eph. 2:1–10; John 3:1–7.) We must be transformed by God himself before we can begin to lay an adequate spiritual foundation for our marriages. The gospel, the Good News regarding the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, assures us that God has made available to all the opportunity to receive a salvation that enables us to begin the process of establishing a solid spiritual foundation for our marriages. (See Rom. 1:16–17; Gal. 5:1, 16–25.)

Give Attention to the Acquisition of Wisdom

Solomon was facing the biggest challenge of his young life; his father was dead, and he felt alone and overwhelmed. Soon he would be king of Israel. He knew the challenge was large and that the people would be difficult to lead. The Lord was sensitive to his feelings and came to him in a dream saying, "Ask! What shall I give you?" Solomon replied, "I am a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. . . . Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil" (1 Kings 3:5, 7, 9 NKJV). God was pleased with Solomon's request and gave to him the gift he sought, and Solomon is immortalized as one of the wisest men who ever lived on our planet. (See 1 Kings 3:5-14.)

The good news is that we can be confident that God will be as gracious with us as he was with Solomon. He will give us wisdom and understanding through his Scriptures, through Jesus, and through special acts of gifting through the Holy Spirit. (See 1 Cor. 1:30; 12:2; 2 Tim. 3:15-17; James 1:5.) He delights in giving us wisdom for the purpose of directing us and empowering us to fulfill the specifications laid out in the blueprint for marriage given in Scripture.

Give Attention to the Issue of Authority

Building an adequate spiritual foundation for our marriages is not possible without first resolving the issue of authority. Again and again in marriage we come to a fork in the road. Only when we build our lives on the foundation of the authoritative Bible do we strengthen our marriages and know the freedom that fosters spontaneity and intimacy. (See 2 Tim. 1:7; 2:15; 3:15-17.)

The apostle Paul uses the picture of the bondservant as an example of the radical obedience to the Word and Spirit that should characterize us as believers. (See Exod. 21:1-6; Rom. 6:11-23.) Bondservants forsake the appeal of personal freedom, follow the motivation of love, bear their responsibilities even if it means great pain, and commit themselves without reservation to the care of those with whom they have made a covenant. The challenge in Christian marriages is for couples to appreciate their need to know God's Word, submit to the authority of God's Word on each and every issue to which it speaks, and look to the Lord for the spiritual empowerment that will enable them to practice a style of obedience that imitates the way of the bond-

servant. Building a strong spiritually based marriage requires from couples a willingness to bring every thought into captivity and conform every behavior to the standard of God's Truth. (See 1 Peter 1:13.)

Give Attention to Imitating Jesus Christ and Walking in the Spirit

Strengthening the spiritual foundation in our marriages requires careful attention to walking in the Spirit and movement toward the specific goal of imitating Jesus Christ. (See Eph. 5:1-7; Gal. 5:16-26.) When the Holy Spirit invades a new believer and implants life in the core self, he or she begins a walk in the Spirit and a process commences. The powerful combination of the Word and the Spirit adds great strength to the spiritual foundation and produces a relational environment that makes marriage a source of enrichment and joy for the participants.

However, the journey of marriage is not always smooth sailing. Christian couples periodically struggle with a fatal attraction to the world and a number of things that are frightfully appealing to the flesh. We will need a great deal of patience with one another when our behaviors are not prompted by the Spirit. We are all too frequently reminded that as individuals and couples, we are works in progress. A current author, who reminds us of the challenge that is ours, says:

Being born anew (regenerated) is a vital and necessary experience, but it is only the beginning work of grace. [The Holy Spirit's] focus is on healing the core of our being, not our whole being in one full swoop. Our personality may be altered only slightly, except for the immediate thrill or joy. Many appetites will still stay the same. Old habits may quickly return. God first renews our hearts, and then begins the slow and often painful change in our personality, habits, attitudes, beliefs and actions. We call this continuing process sanctification.¹

In all of our struggles, however, we can still reshape our internal and external self in the image of the God who created, loves, and redeems us. We can strengthen the spiritual foundations in our marriages and our connection with the Spirit who fosters the redeeming of our marital relationships and all things human. How wonderful to know that while we as couples are working on our marriages, there is one who is equally invested in the redeeming of our entire marriage who is working from the inside out. What a powerful alliance! What

amazing things we can accomplish together—things that strengthen the spiritual foundations in our marriages.

The strengthening of spiritual foundations requires that couples marshal the resources provided by the Holy Spirit and give attention to imitating Jesus Christ in some very specific ways. Specifically, we must seek to imitate him in his love, service, and submission.

Jesus loves, to the end, all who come to him and requires that all who believe in him be recognized by their commitment to fleshing out his love in their relationships. (See John 13:1; 1 John 4:7–11.) I was led recently to reflect upon my own failures to love in a manner consistent with the pattern provided by Christ. My grandson, who is seven, was seated next to me in a restaurant when he spilled the entire contents of a supersized Dr Pepper into my lap. Fortunately, my first response of anger stayed stillborn within me. As I looked into Nathan's ever-expanding eyes and saw the sheer look of terror, a deep love took hold of my inner world and engulfed the anger. In seconds, this love transformed my reactive response into one of tender assurance that all would be fine. He melted in my arms. I went from the experience in humiliation, knowing that this was the response I was capable of, to realizing that in my intimate circles, I sometimes fail to love my wife in this way and as a result the spiritual foundation of our relationship is weakened.

Another issue of great importance for strengthening the spiritual foundation of our marriages is a joint commitment to imitating Christ in our serving. (See John 13:2–17.) The environment generated through serving promotes greater trust. Servant spouses, like the bond-servant, are free to make decisions that are in the best interest of their partners. Like Jesus they can rise and wash the feet of the spouse by meeting the needs that arise in the life of their mate. This freedom fosters personal spiritual growth, enhances security in the relationship, and greatly strengthens the spiritual foundation of the marriage.

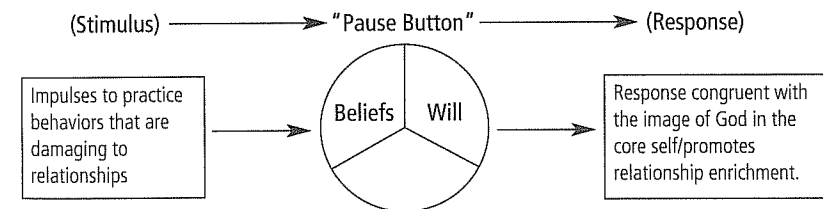
Yet another way in which we are all called to imitate Christ is in our submission. It is unfortunate that the doctrine of submission has so often been pitched only to the feminine gender. Christ was a man, and he modeled submission. (See Phil. 2:5–11.) Prior to Paul's instruction that wives submit to their husbands, we read that all believers are to submit one to another in the fear of the Lord. (See Eph. 5:21.) Submission is possible because the ascended Christ has sent God the Holy Spirit to dwell in us. (See John 15:26–27; 16:12–15.) It's the Spirit's power that enables us to overrule the flesh and live with our

mates in a manner that imitates Christ's love, models servanthood, and submits in a manner that enhances relationships while building on the spiritual foundation of the marriage.

Give Attention to Self-Control

Self-control is only one of the facets of the multidimensional fruit that springs from the interior of the one in whom the Spirit is doing his sanctifying work. In opposition to what Paul calls the works of the flesh, which create chaos and self-will, the Holy Spirit leads us to a calmness and to the control of the self. This results in the ability to say no to the self and to seek to understand others instead of focusing merely on being understood. We can then focus on the needs of our partner when conflict is imminent and work for a win-win outcome.

Couples who do not understand that one of the powerful fruits of the Holy Spirit is self-control fail to draw on the Holy Spirit for his power in their daily lives. They often assert that they are trying but feel powerless and give in to the push and pull of powerful stimuli. They believe that they are helpless and are merely the product of stimulus-response bonds habituated over time. We can sincerely empathize with these people. We all face powerful and multiple stimuli every day that beckon us to violate our covenant with God and our mates. However, men and women, alive in their core selves through the work of the Holy Spirit, are empowered to respond in ways that strengthen spiritual foundations and bring great enrichment to their marriages. The figure below illustrates some of the elements involved in the development of this kind of self-control.



S3

S3 = Spirit's Convicting/Empowering
Scripture's Directives
Savior's Pattern

Christian couples can train themselves to push the pause button or create a time-out between an experience with a stimulus that could damage their marriage relationship and their actual response. The biblical process resulting in the practicing of behaviors that greatly strengthen the spiritual foundation of our marriages includes the following elements:

- We count on the Holy Spirit to be at work inside us, convicting us regarding the inappropriateness of a particular statement, thought, or behavior.
- We push the pause button or say no altogether to an impulse to act in a way that would grieve the Spirit and wound our partner.
- We will to bring our initial response against the grid provided by the Scripture logged in our minds.
- We rely on the power of the Holy Spirit to help us will into existence a response that fits with the pattern provided by the Savior.

This ability to pause and reflect on outcomes is in keeping with the prescriptions of Solomon found in Proverbs 23:1–3. In that passage, Wisdom counsels men and women to consider diligently what is before them when they are being stimulated to partake of something that promises pleasure. Wisdom exhorts that such stimuli are often highly deceptive.

Christian couples understand that establishing this level of self-control is only possible when the decision to walk in the Spirit is actively supported by a training regimen. (See 2 Cor. 9:27.) “Trying” simply will not get the job done! Christian couples must place a high value on the adoption of a training regimen that includes foundation-impacting disciplines such as:

- Scripture reading/memorization
- Prayer
- Fasting
- Meditation
- Solitude
- Worship
- Praise
- Confession

The elements in the training regimen are all significant because they are spiritually designated catalysts the Holy Spirit uses to strengthen the spiritual foundation in our lives and marriages.

Give Attention to Covenant-Keeping and the Care of the Seal

A major part of the biblical manual on marriage is found in the Song of Songs. Nearly all of the elements required for strengthening the spiritual foundations in a marriage are addressed in this poem on marital love. The woman in this biblical poem makes one supreme request of her beloved. “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is as strong as death, jealousy as cruel as the grave” (Song of Songs 8:6 NKJV). Marriage partners are called to be persons of the seal. A central element in the establishment of unshakable spiritual foundations for marriage is a commitment to absolute fidelity to one’s partner.

The seal is a significant symbol in the Bible. It speaks of God’s power and his pledge to and ownership of his child. (See Eph. 1:14.) Ancient kings protected important documents with a seal that spoke of their authority. The seal protects something pure and valuable, and it safeguards against the entrance of that which would contaminate. The concept of the seal is contained within the covenantal structure God proposed for marriage when he said, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24 NKJV). The covenant envisioned here involves delivering or entrusting something to a person with the intent of binding oneself to a particular course of action.

The covenantal seal is meant to designate the irrevocable nature of the relationship. It requires of couples something of the spirit of Hernando Cortez, who in 1519 landed his troops at Vera Cruz, Mexico. When Cortez set fire to the vessels that had brought them, there could be no retreat. The more than six thousand men were irrevocably committed to their task of conquering the new land for the mother country. That kind of no-retreat commitment in marriage is at the heart of the leaving, cleaving, and weaving pattern and is so critical to the building of spiritual foundations in marriages that it is repeated three times in the biblical record. (See Gen. 2:21; Matt. 19:4–5; Eph. 5:31.) An irrevocable commitment to covenant-keeping and a moment by moment guarding of the seal are absolute pre-

requisites for those who wish to place and keep their marriages on a solid spiritual foundation.

Damage to the seal compromises covenant, introduces contaminants like jealousy, and may even spell death for the relationship. The covenantal seal is at the core of a strong spiritual foundation and enables the practicing of a commitment to fidelity that causes men and women to rebel against the idea of sharing their love with any other, in fantasy or reality, but their covenantal companion. (See Prov. 5:15–20.) This commitment to exclusivity heightens the experience of intimacy for both partners. Its absence births a deadly process that is as cruel as the grave. (See Song of Songs 8:7.) The decision to entrust ourselves to another must be supported by a pattern of behavior and self-control that bears witness to the high value that the participants place on covenant-keeping. The consistent protection of the seal and practice of behaviors that validate the internal commitment to covenant foster security in the relationship and strengthen the spiritual foundation of the marriage.

Give Attention to Grace-Based Communication

Next to the protection of the covenantal seal, nothing that a couple can do offers greater potential for strengthening the spiritual foundation in their marriage than the consistent practice of grace-based communication. That is why Paul taught, “Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God” (Eph. 4:29–30 NASB). It would seem that once we understand how important the Holy Spirit is for us to practice the deeds directly related to strengthening the spiritual foundation of our marriages, it would be unthinkable that any of us would knowingly grieve the Holy Spirit and cancel any portion of his available power in our lives.

Jesus admonished his disciples concerning the seriousness of our words when he said, “But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matt. 12:36–37 NKJV). Idle words are careless words or words that are of no profit to the hearer. Literally they are words that communicate the attitude that one could not care less about the one

addressed. Paul counsels men and women to collaborate in the creation of marriage relationships that are grace-based. Paul, like Jesus, cuts us no slack in the responsibility of our words. We are to use absolutely no cutting or corrupting words in our interaction with others. In Ephesians 4:25–32, Paul goes to great lengths to tell us what grace-based communication looks like. Note in Paul’s address to the Ephesians that grace-based communication

- begins with a thorough investigation into the needs of our spouse.
- commits to listening well.
- brings into service behaviors that are meant to benefit and build up our partner.
- gets creative and withholds no resources to meet the needs of our partner. Words. Time. Touch. Nothing is to be held back that will be of benefit.
- allows for nothing that cuts, erodes, or wounds the marital relationship.
- enthusiastically engages the ministry of talk.
- is humbled by the reality that every word spoken carelessly will be brought against us in the day of judgment when we stand before Jesus.

Strengthening spiritual foundations also requires that couples understand that they are “one” in two important ways. First, because of the marriage covenant, they are one flesh. Second, because they are in Christ and in his body, they are also one; or as Paul says, “We are members of one another” (Eph. 4:25 NKJV). Paul insists that whatever impacts one member of the body or the marital team impacts the whole. Because husbands and wives are one, when one rises, the other rises as well. (See 1 Cor. 12:23–26.) If we wound our partners, put them down, cut them with our words, we also wound ourselves and bring ourselves down. If we build up our partner, we also build up ourselves. (See Eph. 4:15–24; 5:25–33.) When we engage in these simple covenants, asking God to set a watch upon our mouths that we might not sin, the Spirit is pleased, his power is unleashed in our relationships, and the spiritual foundation undergirding our marriages is deepened.

Sadly, there will be times when we will fail to fulfill this goal and we wound our partner and grieve the Spirit. In these times, our part-

ner must possess a spirit of humility that allows us to practice repentance when grace has been violated in the relationship.

Repentance needs to be mutual if partners want to experience its full power to strengthen spiritual foundations. Both people must go through a self-examination and be ready to embrace their part of the problem and be willing to take responsibility and repent. Marriages where lasting intimacy is a reality and spiritual foundations are strong consist of husbands and wives who are always open to repentance when they identify the need for dealing with sin.

Give Attention to Friendship

The integrity of the spiritual foundations in Christian marriages is often seriously weakened because one or both partners lack an appreciation for the importance of friendship in the marital relationship. The vital role the Creator envisioned for Adam and Eve required that they form a dynamic team. Each was to draw his or her completion from the other partner. Alone, neither Adam nor Eve could experience the reward that is only within the grasp of the couple. (See Eccles. 4:8–12.) In the same way, we too can only find the reward God intended for married couples when we see ourselves as dependent/independent creations discovering rewards within the context of our friendship and our engagement together for his purposes.

Friendship figures prominently in the Bible's teaching on marriage. Husbands must love their wives as Christ loves the members of his church. (See Eph. 5:28.) Christ calls us his friends and longs to share his thoughts with us. (See John 15:15.) Christian couples are challenged to share this same level of intimacy with one another. In the Song of Songs we hear the level of desired intimacy described with the words, "This is my beloved, and this is my friend" (Song of Songs 5:16 NKJV). Elsewhere, Jehovah blasts the men of Israel because they have dealt treacherously with their wives. He states, "She is your companion and your wife by covenant" (Mal. 2:14 NKJV).

Friendship is absolutely essential if spiritual foundations are to be strengthened. Friends each possess strengths that are different from the other, but those strengths can support the other. Each person has things to offer their partner. But each person must value the differences discovered in their mate and be the joyful recipient of the other person's gifts. The sexual relationship represents a special kind of

knowing in which the differences are more easily celebrated and hold great potential for strengthening the spiritual foundation of a marriage. But this is to be true of all areas of differences between husband and wife. When we can value the differences in us, it will result in a special kind of knowing that takes us to the deepest foundation of our relationship and greatly enhances our marriage.

When husbands and wives are properly related to God and experience a rich friendship with each other, life is experienced on a higher level and the spiritual foundation is strengthened. Solomon captured the ecstasy of the marital relationship when he said, "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up" (Eccles. 4:9–10 NKJV). Reward is a comprehensive experience that strengthens our relationship and gives rise to spontaneous joy as we value our differences and appreciate the truth that together we represent a force greater than the sum of our individual strengths.

Conclusion

Building the spiritual foundation in marriages is one of the greatest challenges faced by Christian couples. Couples today are bombarded with opposing views on the ideal marriage. The media and the Internet afford opportunities for the indulgence of fantasies in ways that are unparalleled in history and can have a devastating impact on our spiritual foundation. Christian couples are miraculously empowered for strengthening their marriages because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit received at salvation. Our redemption leads to our spiritual growth, which is a restoration of the divine image in the core of our personality. This empowers Christian men and women to imitate Christ and to flesh out the blueprint for marriage provided in the Bible.

Couples who understand that building a strong spiritual foundation for Christian marriage is a joint effort will elect to embrace a comprehensive training regimen and a lifestyle of accountability and self-control focused on the protection of the seal and the development of grace-based relationships. The specifications handed down by God himself are realized when couples follow the training regimen provided in the biblical blueprint and rely on the Holy Spirit who works from the inside out. They are empowered to push the pause button

and implement behaviors that will greatly strengthen the spiritual foundations of their marriage.

Questions to Discuss

1. Can you think of a time when you felt overwhelmed? Did you cry out to God for wisdom? What happened? Have you ever asked God to give you, as a couple, wisdom to make your marriage all you desire it to be?
2. From Ephesians 5:15–33, write out the behaviors that are characteristic of a person filled with the Holy Spirit. Then from Colossians 3:12–25, write out the characteristics of a person whose mind is filled with the words of Christ. Now examine these lists. What does the similarity suggest to you regarding your relationship as a couple with the Word of God and the Holy Spirit?
3. Stand facing your husband or wife. Hold hands and one of you lift your hands toward the ceiling. What happens to the hands of the other? Now move your hands toward the floor. What happens to the other person? You are one! When one rises so does the other. When one is demoted, damaged, brought low, so goes the partner. Take a few moments to discuss the implications of Paul's words "We are members of one another."
4. Make a list of the ways your mate differs from you. Choose several of these differences and share with your mate why you value these differences. Why is it important to value your differences?

For Further Reading

- Tim Clinton and Julie Clinton, *The Marriage You've Always Wanted: How to Grow a Stronger, More Intimate Relationship* (Greenville, Mass.: Word Publishing, 2000).
- Al Janssen, *The Marriage Masterpiece: A Bold New Vision for Your Marriage* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 2001).
- Phillip C. McGraw, *Relationship Rescue* (New York: Hyperion, 2000).
- Gary Smalley and John Trent, *The Language of Love* (Colorado Springs: Focus on the Family, 1995).

Part 2

Developing the Skills of Marriage