

### **Ready? Set? Wait, What?**

“Unless you learn to play a duet in the same key, to the same rhythm, a slow process of disengagement will wedge you apart, first secretly, psychologically, and then openly and miserably,” Walter Wangerin Jr. To play a duet, practicing separately only and coming together for the performance will not work. The successes of countless duos that have planned and prepared together are evidence enough. So, intentionally preparing together for the big day is exactly what needs to be done. It must be ensured that the duo is really looking at the same page of music. Marriage is a lifelong duet.

Countless little girls imagine every detail of their wedding, from the dress to the cake and every small detail in between. They envision themselves walking down the aisle, being the focus of all eyes, and the only thing that is left a mystery is the Mr. Right standing at the front of the church waiting to take her hand. She even practices with her Barbie dolls how the whole day will go. She may even plan daily events and have her dolls go to buy groceries together and have kids. Yes, many little girls practice a wedding and even a marriage.

It would be ignorant to say that no boys ever play out a post-marriage scenario. What he thinks his wife will do around the house and how his welcome home from work will occur. He may not go as far as to act these thoughts out at any length, but thoughts of wedding and marriage have also gone through his mind as a practice of sorts.

So, if this the previously mentioned boy and girl grew up and fell madly in love, seriously smitten and get married, just because each of them had practiced, does not

mean that the coming together will be smooth. Take for instance a football team that never practices together, will find it quite difficult to ever be able to effectively play in a game together. Julie Baumgardner, Executive Director of First Things First explains it this way:

Make a plan for your marriage. Going into marriage without a plan is like playing a football game without memorizing the playbook. If you are going to win, you have to have team meetings, set goals, learn and relearn skills, learn how to lead and follow, and share responsibilities. You both need a copy of the playbook.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, planning and practicing apart is not going to accomplish anything in the long run.

Likewise, marriage preparation is not just planning for the wedding. The wedding is just the first day of the marriage, a public event and celebration, and in reality has almost nothing to do with marriage other than the making official of the legal union contract. That is not to belittle the culmination of a lifelong union rich with tradition and ceremony, but rather, to keep the reality in sight. The wedding itself is more often seen as a social gathering at which nuptials are ceremonially exchanged and not the ceremony of nuptials at which there is a social gathering.

There is much more to a marriage than the white dress and nice pictures of the wedding day. "Too often, we tend to focus everything on the wedding ceremony and little or nothing on marriage. We see the beauty of the ceremony but miss the beauty and wonder of the covenant. We sometimes also miss the fact that we are embarking

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<sup>1</sup> Baumgardner, Julie. "Half of All Marriages Succeed." First Things First. 2007. 21 Feb 2009  
<<http://firstthings.org/page/resource-center/for-married-couples/half-of-all-marriages-succeed>>.

on one of the most difficult journeys of our lives, one that does not begin on the wedding day.”<sup>2</sup> Planning a wedding can be an arduous task, but that does not make it the most important part of the union, not by any means.

There is a myth believed by many that if a couple really loves each other, they should just get married, no questions asked. “For too long the trend has been to fall in love, marry, and hope for the best.”<sup>3</sup> With about a fifty percent marriage success rate in the United States, it is about time someone started asking questions. “According to Dr. Jason Carroll and Dr. William J. Doherty, couples who participate in premarital programs experience a 30% increase in marital success over those who do not participate.”<sup>4</sup> Couples who take part in inventories such as PREPARE, prior to getting married, sometimes find that their differences are too great to overcome and decide to not marry. The PREPARE inventory can predict with about 80% accuracy whether a marriage will end in divorce or be “happy.”<sup>5</sup> These premarital programs and inventories include just the kinds of questions that need to be asked. They go far beyond the face value of love that a couple shares and delve deep into what makes a relationship thrive and survive.

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<sup>2</sup> James, Kay Coles. What I Wish I'd Known Before I Got Married. Multnomah, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Parrott, Dr. Les and Dr. Leslie. Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts. Zondervan, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Boyle, Jeremy. "The Case for Marriage Preparation." Forever Families. 21 Feb 2009 <[http://www.foreverfamilies.net/xml/articles/case\\_for\\_marriage\\_prep.aspx](http://www.foreverfamilies.net/xml/articles/case_for_marriage_prep.aspx)>.

<sup>5</sup> Knutson, Luke and David H. Olson. "PREPARE Outcome Study." PREPARE-ENRICH. 2003. Life Innovations, Inc.. 21 Feb 2009 <[https://www.prepare-enrich.com/webapp/pe\\_main/mainsite/research/template/DisplaySecureContent.vm;pc=1235258190286?id=pe\\_main\\_site\\_content\\*pages\\*research\\*public\\*ResearchOnPEProgram.html&xlat=Y&emb\\_org\\_id=0&emb\\_prp\\_id=0&emb\\_unq\\_id=0&emb\\_lng\\_code=ENGLISH](https://www.prepare-enrich.com/webapp/pe_main/mainsite/research/template/DisplaySecureContent.vm;pc=1235258190286?id=pe_main_site_content*pages*research*public*ResearchOnPEProgram.html&xlat=Y&emb_org_id=0&emb_prp_id=0&emb_unq_id=0&emb_lng_code=ENGLISH)>.

Those who participated in premarital programs are now partaking in the benefits which include: “improved communication, better conflict management skills, higher dedication to one's mate, greater emphasis on the positive aspects of a relationship, and improved overall relationship quality,”<sup>6</sup> according to Jeremy Boyle in “The Case for Marriage Preparation.” Boyle further explains, there is also research which supports the notion that pre-marriage preparation can help prevent divorce by helping couples get an accurate picture of their relationship and take the steps necessary to improve and strengthen it, or making them aware of the significant differences before they get married.

Marriages which are firmly built on the foundation of intentional preparation will be stronger and as such, a better environment in which to raise children. Researcher William Doherty suggests, “If you are married, remind yourself repeatedly that your marriage is the foundation of your family and the cornerstone of your children’s security.”<sup>7</sup> Studies show that children whose parents have a healthy marriage relationship are healthier both physically and emotionally and are less likely to engage in at risk behavior overall.<sup>8</sup> By all indications, it appears that pre-marriage preparation not only promotes a healthy marriage, but a healthy family life as well.

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<sup>6</sup> Boyle, “The Case for Marriage Preparation.”

<sup>7</sup> Olson, David H. and John DeFrain. Marriages & Families Intimacy, Diversity, and Strengths. 5th Edition. New York, NY: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 2006.

<sup>8</sup> “Benefits of Healthy Marriages.” Marriage Statistics. Family Dynamics Institute. 21 Feb 2009  
<<http://www.familydynamics.net/benefitsofhealthymarriages.htm>>.

“Planning the perfect wedding too often takes precedence over planning a successful marriage. And lack of planning is the ultimate saboteur of marriage.”<sup>9</sup> To avoid the sabotage of the marriage intentional preparation must be made. Pre-marriage preparation often takes place under the advising of a religious leader like a pastor. One of the most popular pre-marriage inventories is PREPARE developed by David H. Olson and Luke Knutson. This program paired with premarital counseling “significantly improved couple satisfaction....their communication and conflict resolution skills and improved their couple agreement on many areas of the relationship.”<sup>10</sup> Many churches also pair this counseling and inventory program with a program that is called Pre-Cana, setting an engaged couple up with a married couple to serve as a mentor.

When two people join together in marriage, it is important for them to realize that they are not the only two people being affected by the union. The entirety of each person’s family of origin as well as friends and people in their backgrounds are a part of that person’s life and helped shape who they are. It would only make sense then, that the in-laws, parents of both the bride and groom also be included in the preparations for the marriage. Norman Wright expresses his feelings of importance of including the sets of parents in his book *The Other Woman in Your Marriage*. He explains that the man and woman to be married and their respective parents should all come together and make separate lists about the expectations for the new marriage relationship then

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<sup>9</sup> Parrott, *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*.

<sup>10</sup> Olson and DeFrain, p.313.

discuss the reality of each item.<sup>11</sup> This simple “meeting of the minds” can help clear up any discrepancies before they become an issue of the marriage.

The union of marriage is a complete joining. When the marriage is consummated, “So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate,” Matthew 19:6 That being said, the absolute must-have of pre-marriage preparation is the Triune God at the center. “Premarital counseling can help you align your relationship with God’s will for your lives; that brings Him honor.”<sup>12</sup> God’s will and inclusion is essential. Ecclesiastes 4:12b says, “A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.”<sup>13</sup> The man, one strand, the woman, another strand, and God the final strand, intertwined to form a strong cord. Though they are both strands of the same cord, their roles are quite unique and differ in a big way.

The role of the wife is described in Ephesians 5:22-24, “Wives submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.” Submission is something which people often see as having a negative connotation, but in its true sense, this word is only positive. To submit to one’s husband is to voluntarily place oneself under his leadership, to support his mission and to respect him.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Wright, H. Norman. The Other Woman in Your Marriage. Regal Books, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> Schwab, Kara. "Speak Now or Forever Hold Your Peace." Boundless Webzine 10 FEB 2005 21 Feb 2009 <<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001043.cfm>>.

<sup>13</sup> Concordia Self-Study Bible. New International Version. Zondervan Publishing House, 1973. (All Bible quotations from this source unless otherwise noted.)

<sup>14</sup> Fenske, Jim. Christian Ethics at Lutheran High School West, Rocky River, OH. 2007.

For men, as the husband, the Scriptures lay it out in a more detailed way in  
Ephesians 5:25-33:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but hold and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he love himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

Men are to love their wives sacrificially to the point of giving up their own lives for their wives because they are to love her as Christ loves the church. They are to care for her, provide for her needs, and give up their own needs and desires to make her life better.<sup>15</sup>

Couples prior to marriage need also realize that every day is not going to be happy, that is not what God made marriage to be. “But those who marry will face troubles in this life...” 1 Corinthians 7:28. God’s goal for marriage is not a state of perpetual happiness, but rather, growth.<sup>16</sup> Kay Coles James warns, “Don’t underestimate the work involved, but don’t panic either.”<sup>17</sup> All good things take work. Marriage is not an exception. Even when the realization that passivity will not do further

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<sup>15</sup> Fenske, Jim. Christian Ethics at Lutheran High School West, Rocky River, OH. 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Fenske, Jim. Christian Ethics at Lutheran High School West, Rocky River, OH. 2007.

<sup>17</sup> James, Kay Coles. What I Wish I'd Known Before I Got Married. Multnomah, 2001.

recognize, “no couple should enter marriage unaware of Satan’s devices to undermine and destroy relationships.”<sup>18</sup>

Marriage preparation is not merely planning for a wedding, nor practicing alone for a marriage. Studies show that pre-marriage preparation is vital in making marriages more successful. Pre-marriage preparation may include a variety of different things such as a couple inventory, meeting with both families of origin, having married couple mentors, and counseling. Regardless of title or specific methodology, intentional pre-marriage preparation is crucial to the marriage health and success as well as the entire family’s well-being.

Whether considering a musical duet or a play in the game of football, preparation is key. Plan; prepare; and do it together. Do not walk down the aisle thinking, “Ready? Set? Wait, What?”

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<sup>18</sup> Prokopchak, Steve and Mary. Called Together. Christian Pubns, 2003.