

Should They Get Married? Should She Marry Him?

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[Abstract: These two authors raise five important questions for pastors to use in pre-marital teaching and counseling sessions as well as to challenge teens and other pre-engaged couples.]

You've probably seen the Fram oil filter commercial on TV. The mechanic stands between two cars. One car is in for an oil change and routine maintenance; the other is a smoking wreck with a blown engine. He points out the easy way and the hard way to keep your car working: "You can pay me now . . . or you can pay me later." The cost to you now is only the cost of a filter. The cost later is a whole lot more: a major overhaul because of the amount of damage.

Choosing to get married ought to be something like choosing a Fram oil filter! That doesn't mean there is no place for romance and a special 'click' between two people. But in choosing to get married there are a number of basic questions that one should ask first. There is 'preventative maintenance' that can keep one from coming in with a 'blown engine' later. Only if the engine is running smoothly can one enjoy the wind in his hair! We propose five questions engaged couples can ask themselves and discuss together. Answering these will help them to decide on solid grounds, "Should we get married?" The time for couples to ask themselves some serious questions is before they ask that most serious question: "Will you marry me?" Answering the following questions now, before they make the commitment, can prevent the pain of major repair work later.

1. Are both Christians?

Marriage is a covenant of companionship. Two people pull together in the

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same harness. If two people have God first in their lives they are able to answer with confidence, “Yes, we both know Jesus as our Savior and Lord.” They have the fountain of life within them. They have the active guidance of a personal shepherd over them. Under Christ’s lordship they will be able to face with confidence whatever comes their way. Do they believe in Jesus, the unique Son of God the Father, who died in their place, who was raised from the dead to give them the Holy Spirit and the power of a new life, and who will return to give them an immortal life with Him?

Being a Christian means to have these truths shine into one’s heart, so that he knows God and receives His particular sort of love. Being a Christian is also more than one’s profession of faith in Jesus Christ. It is a way of life. Being a Christian means in practice that one loves and relies on Jesus more than on his spouse. Are they both living as Christians? Or are they making marriage more important than Jesus? Knowing Jesus is more than owning a club membership in the church. Couples need to ask each other: “Is Jesus the Lord for you? Is He your #1 priority? The master you listen to? The one you trust more than anything or anyone?” We see at least four ways in which Jesus’ lordship over people can be compromised easily when it comes to deciding about whether to get married.

First, is the couple looking to marriage to satisfy their deepest needs and desires? When this happens, Christ is no longer their lord in a practical way. Do they think getting married will provide meaning in their life? Direction? Security? Self-Respect? Do they hope marriage will remove a sense of despair, inadequacy, failure, bitterness, and isolation? Do they say to themselves, “If only I find a husband then I’ll be happy,” or “I can finally find love, acceptance, and security if I get married,” or “My life is a failure unless I get married?” Often people come to marriage with these—or other—unrealistic expectations. They expect marriage to do what only Jesus can do. Unrealistic and distorted views of marriage can lead to disappointment, frustration, anger, and despair when one’s partner lets him down and proves to have “feet of clay.”

Will marriage be the couple’s source of joy and happiness? Is it going to make their life ‘come together’? Marriage is a blessing. It is the richest and closest human relationship we can enjoy. In a good marriage there is the potential to receive many good things: intimate friendship, encouragement, sexual joy, the satisfaction of working in partnership, children, and the freedom to be one’s self that comes when he is fully known and fully accepted by another. But one’s spouse will not solve his personal problems nor fulfill all his desires. Marriage first must be a place where one is committed to learn how to give

blessing, even when the going is tough. If one bases his meaning and security on the promises and gifts of God in Jesus Christ, he will be able not only to weather storms but to grow through the storms into greater maturity and love.

One has to be honest with himself. Deep down, is he looking to a marriage for what he hopes to get from it? Or is he aware of what he must give, because he has gotten already from God what he really needs? “In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12). Of course everyone wants the blessings of a good marriage. But does he want even more to build his own life on Jesus and then give those blessings to another? This way of life is the only “house built on a rock,” able to keep standing when disappointments come. The traditional vow expresses this well: “for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part.”

Second, is a believer thinking of marrying a non-Christian? The Bible clearly teaches that Christians should not be “unequally yoked” (II Corinthians 6:14-16). We have met people who waffle at this point. They try to excuse going against Jesus’ lordship. When this happens, their own commitment to Christ is really in question. The black-and-white view of II Corinthians 6:14-16 (righteousness and wickedness, light and dark, Christ and the Devil, belief and unbelief, God and idolatry) is rather hard to miss! If one chooses to marry against Christ, then romance or infatuation or desires for marriage or fears of not being married have taken control of his life. And that is idolatry. The professing Christian actually is being tempted to choose the ‘dark’ side of II Corinthians 6. They think that the worst for them is what will be best.

A subtler version of this problem occurs when one wants to marry someone whose profession of faith is suspect. For example, we often have encountered the situation of a man who wants to marry a Christian woman. In the course of their relationship he finds that she will only marry another Christian, so he thinks, “Fine, I can go along with that and join her church.” What is happening here? His ulterior motive is to win the girl, not to give his life to the Lord. This scenario occurs all too often. Once again, they will be unequally yoked. One must establish as a reality that Jesus Christ is more important than either the marriage or the other person. Far from hindering one’s joy in life, this will lead him to greater joy and spare him much pain.

Third, does either of the couple have complicating entanglements from past marriages or relationships? We live in a society of “easy come, easy go.” Marriage, sex and children are not viewed with the sanctity with which the Lord Jesus views them. If Christ is the Lord of one’s life, he needs to determine,

according to His Word, whether He says he is free to marry or remarry now. There are 'legal' divorces which Jesus views as illegitimate (Matthew 19:1-9). There are times when the Lord commands us to continue to pursue reconciliation rather than remarry (I Corinthians 7:10-11). There are also situations where the marriage is viewed by God as broken, and a person is free to consider remarrying (Matthew 5:31-32; I Corinthians 7:12-16, 39; Romans 7:2-3). All the ins and outs of these questions go beyond the scope of our discussion here. But if one has prior entanglements (e.g., a prior marriage, children out of wedlock, etc.) he should think through the implications of what the Lord says. He should seek pastoral counsel from others who will take the biblical passages seriously. The book, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage* by Jay Adams, also provides a clear discussion of the issues.

Fourth, has God given either of the couple the gift of singleness? The Bible makes clear that God sometimes calls people to a fruitful ministry as a single person. This possibility is discussed by two very well known singles, Jesus and Paul (see Matthew 19:1-12; 1 Corinthians 7:1-9 and 7:17-40)! An unmarried person is able to devote himself to the affairs of the kingdom of God without being encumbered by responsibilities to a spouse and children. Marriage has a cost: "Those who marry will face many troubles in this life," Paul writes in I Corinthians 7:28. A single person, using his or her singleness well, has a flexibility and freedom to do things which a married person cannot consider. Remember, for over one thousand years the 'ideal' Christian was unmarried! Celibacy perhaps was overvalued in the medieval church, to the detriment of marriage. But in our society the church usually goes to the opposite extreme. Some of the most fruitful ministries in the contemporary church are based on the freedom singleness gives. John Stott, the renowned British author and preacher, has been free to minister to Christians around the world. In our own church we see singles uniquely able to meet difficult counseling needs, to get involved with teenagers, to give time to the poor or to refugees, to help others with moving or house painting or childcare. An unmarried person can have the time to volunteer in a local hospital or nursing home or to get involved in political activity. Unmarried people with good jobs are free of many financial pressures which families feel, and they are freed for generosity. One single person we know even has set up a small foundation to give away a large percentage of his salary.

It may well be that one has the gift of marriage. In this case he will thrive best by seeking to establish a family. But he must take time to determine whether he has the gift of singleness. What are one's ministry gifts and opportunities? How strong is his sexual drive, and how well does he have it under

control? How important are children to him and to what he does best? What are the advantages as well as disadvantages of remaining unmarried? What would be some of the 'costs' as well as benefits of getting married?

Marriage is a great gift. There is no doubt about that. It is a joy to have an intimate partner for life. But there is a danger here. Marriage is not the greatest gift, nor does it provide the deepest and surest joys. "Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!" (II Corinthians 9:15) That gift is Jesus, not one's boyfriend or girlfriend. Don't let getting married become an idol. Make sure Jesus is first in a couple's life. With Him as the foundation they will enjoy building a relationship of enduring love with each other in the Lord. If marriage is right, then it will be built on a great foundation.

For discussion: Jesus Christ is called "Savior" and "Lord." What do these mean in your life?

How does one pray about marriage? Is it, "Lord, give me a husband (or wife)?"

Has one made a public profession of faith in a Bible-believing church?

Is the couple free of entanglements from past marriages or relationships?

Do one or both have the gift of singleness?

Would marriage help or hinder their usefulness to the Lord?

2. Does the couple have a track record of solving problems biblically?

Problems come up in every relationship. How does the couple handle them? This is a more complicated question than the first one. Because we are all sinners with problems, none of us has a perfect track record here. If one is honest he likely will answer, "Sometimes" or "No." The key is not perfection; rather, is his "no" becoming "sometimes" or is his "sometimes" becoming "more times?" Is there a growing "yes?" This question focuses on one's maturity. Does the couple act like godly adults or like spoiled children when facing problems, disagreements, misunderstandings, disappointments, decisions, or trials? Marriage is not for children.

The question of one's maturity for marriage has three parts: Does he know how to solve problems biblically? Does he do it? If not, where does he need to change and grow? In Matthew 7:24-27 Jesus says, "Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on a rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on a

rock.” Jesus speaks of knowing His words, the Bible. But that, of course, is not enough. He speaks of putting them into practice. Problems will come, but if a couple learns to face them His way, He promises they will stand.

First, does the couple know how to solve problems biblically? Are they wise people? A mature person is able to think about life and its problems in relation to the Lord and His Word. A pre-engaged couple can’t anticipate every problem, of course. But do they have a general awareness of how the Bible speaks practically to the major areas of life: commitment, communication, forgiving each other, facing adversity, sexual relations, child rearing, finances, etc.? The Bible speaks to these things and they ought to know something about what it says and be willing to learn more.

A Christian couple, who had been married for fifteen years, came in for counseling because of severe marital problems. After several sessions, the wife sheepishly acknowledged that she had never thought about the fact that she was supposed to make her husband a priority in her life! She married without any understanding of what the Bible says about the nature of the marriage commitment. Many years of pain, loneliness, and misunderstanding could have been prevented if she could have started out knowing the Lord’s way to build a joyful and solid marriage.

Second, does the couple do what the Bible says? This takes them out of the area of theory and makes them look at what they really do! What is their usual pattern of addressing problems? Failure to solve problems biblically shows up in lots of obvious ways. Is one a bully? Does one manipulate? Do they avoid facing problems? Do they let things slide until they forget about them? Do they avoid facing problems? Do they store up resentments? Is one a sulker? Does one blameshift and makeexcuses, always pointing the finger at the other person or at circumstances? Do they keep on doing things the Bible says are wrong?

Or have they learned the basic skills of how to solve problems? Do they bring things up and talk them through? Do they go to Christ for help? Do they take time to think about what is the right thing to do? Does one ask forgiveness for his side of the problem, no matter what the spouse has contributed to the problem? Do they strive to forgive each other? Do they pray together? After they have forgiven each other, do they let the past go and express love to each other again? Do they keep the lines of communication open all the time, to prevent problems from even developing? If a backyard gardener wants eventually to harvest lots of fresh vegetables, he needs seeds, fertilizer, a hoe, and a watering can. If a partner in marriage wants eventually to enjoy the blessings in marriage,

he needs skills in solving problems and building honesty and trust.

Third, where does the couple need to change and grow to become wiser? If they do not have a track record of solving problems biblically, it does not mean they immediately should end the friendship. But it does mean the caution flag is out, and they must work—together and in pre-engagement counseling—on their problem areas. We are very serious about this. Are there patterns of sin in their lives? Are they tempting each other sexually? Are they critical or cruel towards each other verbally or physically? Do they lie? Are they putting on a front and concealing areas of their past or present? Do they spend money impulsively? Is one bitter at the other's parents? Does one have any extreme fears? Each needs to be honest with self and potential mate, facing these things in the light of the mercy and grace of Jesus Christ. These are areas we grow in. If there is no growth, but problems continue unresolved with one or both parties, then they should not marry. We are not speaking of perfection—who could ever get married!—but of meaningful, moving-in-the-right-direction progress. Remember the oil filters: “You can pay me now, or pay me a lot more later.”

Problem patterns don't go away when one gets married. Instead they are aggravated, and the painful consequences multiply. For example, a single man with a temper problem may be annoying and obnoxious at times to his friends, but he will be frightening and dangerous to his wife and children. If the temper is dealt with before engagement, pain and heartache will be avoided. A man who has learned that his will is not good, who has learned to be honest and own up to his sins, and who is growing in self-control, will make a husband worth marrying.

We've painted the dark side so far. There is also a beautiful side that accompanies an honest “Yes” to the question, “Do you have a track record of solving problems biblically?” Positive patterns also remain when one gets married. If a couple has faced even small rough spots together and yet has seen honesty, compassion, kindness, patience, and trust grow between them, then they have reason to expect God's Spirit will continue to work His fruits into their lives. The confidence with which a couple will be able to face and solve problems brings a freedom into their commitment to each other that is joyous beyond words. Imagine being able to promise, “till death us do part,” knowing that you have what it will take to make it happen. The couple with a record of solving problems biblically can make this promise. Jesus Christ is active in their lives and they are attentive to His voice in the nitty-gritty hardships of life.

For discussion: List three problems or disagreements which the couple have faced in the past and discuss how they dealt with them.

List three problems they now face and discuss how they propose to solve them biblically.

Study together Galatians 5:13-6:10. In their lives where do they find sinful tendencies? Where do they find love?

3. Are both heading in the same direction in life?

When the Bible speaks of marriage it speaks four times of “leaving and cleaving.” Leaving means one is tied no longer to the direction set by his parents and his single life. Cleaving means one chooses to move in the same direction as his spouse.

Certainly there never will be total agreement and uniformity between two people. After all, one is not marrying himself but someone who will complement him. We are not making an argument for the secular notion of ‘compatibility,’ that both have to be hatched out of the same mold. Two very different people can have a wonderful marriage. But there are basic kinds of agreement which a man and woman must come to in order to cleave to one another. This calls one to make a realistic assessment of his similarities and differences and to make realistic choices and plans about the future. Jesus says that we must count the cost of our decisions (Luke 14:28-29). Amos asks, “Can two people walk together unless they be agreed?” (Amos 3:3). We are suggesting to every couple contemplating marriage that they ask “leaving and cleaving” questions of themselves. Look at each other realistically and objectively.

Leaving Questions:

Are both willing to make a break emotionally with their parents? Failure to do this leads to such problems as: the man who visits his mother every day before returning home to his wife; the man who won’t defend his wife against criticism by his parents; the woman who insists that all vacations be taken with her parents; the woman who “goes home to mother”—by phone or physical visit—at the first sign of difficulty. Leaving your parents means you build a new family unit.

Are both willing to make a break financially? Is each taking the responsibility to care for himself and pay his own way?

Are they willing to break with their jobs? In our career-oriented world, does one understand that his spouse comes before his job, and he cannot neglect his spouse for the sake of work or study?

Are they willing to break with the right a single person has to make independent decisions, to keep his own counsel, to go as he pleases, and to maintain the degree of privacy he chooses? To choose to “leave” is to choose to become “one flesh” with another person. One opens his life and makes joint decisions. I Corinthians 7 teaches that there is a cost (loss of individual freedom) in gaining the intimacy and partnership of marriage.

Obviously each of these hard questions needs to be balanced properly. In each of these questions we do not mean “break” in an absolute sense. Rather one fundamentally needs to rearrange his priorities, values, and commitments with his spouse at the center. Certainly one will love his parents; there are appropriate ways parents might help him out; he will not ignore his friends; he will go to work; he will remain an individual. But in each case there is a redefinition of the place these things play in his life.

Cleaving Questions:

Where is one going in his life? What are his gifts and ministry interests? What is he doing with his life to serve the Lord? Can both walk alongside each other gladly? What kind of job does he have or can he anticipate?

What is his basic lifestyle? What are his work hours and work habits? How does he like to spend leisure and recreational time? How does he spend Saturdays? When does he go to bed and wake up? How much TV does he watch—1 hour per week or 4 hours per night? What kind of food does he like? Is he a ‘health nut’ or ‘junk food junkie’? How will he use the Lord’s Day (it will be one seventh of their life together)? Do they have things they enjoy doing together?

What level of financial and material expectations do they have? How is money handled? What percentage of their income are they now giving to the Lord?

What kind of neighborhood do they anticipate living in—inner city row home or suburban mansion? What geographical location—Uganda or Vermont or New York City?

What level and kinds of church involvement do they desire? Will they go to church once a week or will they spend four nights a week in church activities? How much time do they spend devotionally?

Are they basically agreed in their theology? How do they view the authority of Scripture, Calvinism, the charismatic movement, baptism, eschatology, etc.?

What are their views and attitudes towards the role of man and woman, husband and wife? Will both work? How should decisions be made?

How many children do they want—none? two? the more the merrier? How should children be loved and cared for? How should children be disciplined? What are the disciplinable offenses? Who does what with the children?

How often will they visit parents? Where do they like to spend vacations and holidays? How often will they be with other friends besides each other?

This is a sampling of the kinds of questions we believe couples contemplating marriage should ask themselves. Perhaps you can think of others.

We'll ask it again: are both heading in the same direction in their lives? Sometimes this is a hard question for a young couple to take seriously. It is easy to say, "Yeah, yeah, we're going in the same direction; we'll work it out." But the present direction is the best predictor of the future. A couple should stand back and take a good, realistic look at themselves. On the one hand, are there any 'red flags' which indicate that some of these important issues have not been resolved in one and/or the other person? A couple has to resist the temptation to whitewash these questions! On the other hand, are there 'green flags' indicating that their lives in fact are moving more and more in the same direction? If their answer is "Yes," be encouraged! A vow of marriage can be made with great joy when they are confident that both are "leaving" and are ready to "cleave" in order to walk together for the rest of their lives.

For discussion: Talk through the above questions.

4. What do others who know the couple well think of their relationship?

We all need the counsel and input of others into our lives. Deciding to marry is one of the most important decisions one ever will make. Being married will affect the rest of one's life here on earth. One would be foolish to buy a house unless someone who knew houses checked it out structurally for him. But unfortunately many people do not even take the simple step of asking for some informed advice about whom to marry.

We often do not see ourselves as well as others see us. And sometimes we are so star-struck with another person that we do not see the whole picture very clearly. While we don't let others make our decisions for us, the Bible makes clear that one is not to be a 'Lone Ranger', relying only on self for wisdom. Two (or more) heads are better than one. Proverbs 15:22 says, "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisors they succeed." Romans 15:14 tells us

that as we grow in the knowledge of God we become “competent to counsel” each other.

It can be tough to balance the fact that one needs the counsel of others, while at the same time he must make the final decision. We usually see three kinds of people in this regard. The overly independent ‘Lone Ranger,’ willfully and stubbornly refusing any input and counsel from others, says, “I make my own decisions.” The overly dependent ‘slave-to-others’-opinions’ looks for others to make decisions for him. He says implicitly, “You decide for me.” Such a person is on an endless treadmill, blown back and forth by the various opinions of others and afraid to make decisions. The third kind of person, the biblically free person, is able to use counsel well. This is the person who is confident that the final decision is his own but is also aware that he is limited and fallible. He knows his need for Christ and for others. Thus he is free to invite any and all counsel that might help make a wise decision.

Whom should one ask? We are not saying, “Talk it over with your hair dresser, and if he gives you the green light, go ahead.” One must choose his counselors well. He should look for four things. First, he should seek people who know him. People who have seen him and his potential mate in action together can make helpful observations. Second, he should seek people who know what makes a marriage work, who are experienced, ‘older and wiser’ than he is, whose opinions and wisdom he respects. Even non-Christians (parents, relatives, family friends, a college roommate, workmate, or employer) may have perspectives that would be worth taking into account. Third, he should seek people who will help him look at marriage from a Christian point of view. His pastor, an elder from his church, a fellowship group leader, or wise Christian friends can help him think biblically about what is involved in getting married. Getting specifically biblical pre-engagement counseling is extremely important, whether done informally or formally. Fourth, he should seek his parents because they know him, have lived longer than he, and care about what happens to him.

We must say another word about talking with one’s parents. Many young adults have a strained relationship with their parents. Perhaps in childhood or adolescence they developed a pattern of ignoring or despising their parents’ counsel and ideas. Or perhaps one or both parents sinned against their child by criticism, physical abuse, divorce, or other ungodly behavior. There is now a distance between the child and his parents. At this stage in life, as one anticipates getting married, there is a wonderful opportunity to seek to heal the breach. It is a time to attempt to talk to one’s parents in depth, to listen to their ideas, to show respect, and to take them seriously. Tying up the loose ends of one’s past helps ensure that he will not bring ‘emotional baggage’ into the marriage.

Reconciliation with one's parents will ease his spouse's entry into his family. His spouse won't have to suffer the tensions and strains of his past. There may be cases where such reconciliation is impossible, but that in itself is a situation which merits earnest prayer and frank discussion. But in most cases we have witnessed the opposite: both parents and child experience a new adult-to-adult closeness and respect. Walls of mistrust and hurt on both sides are melted by new love and understanding. The marriage then becomes an occasion for "giving away the bride" with great joy. One should go with humility to his parents. God has many kinds of good gifts for His children, and healing the 'generation gap' is one of them.

How should one weigh the counsel he receives? A lot of the best counsel one will receive does not come in the form of direct advice, but rather helps him clarify the issues before him. It helps him understand more accurately his motives, reservations, and goals. Seeking counsel is not the same as taking a poll: "7 out of 12 people say I should marry Sue, so I'll go for it." Rather, he seeks feedback from others to inform what will be his decision, a decision he wants to make wisely.

Sometimes someone may raise questions or objections improperly, or may pressure him to go ahead. He may not be able to satisfy everybody; the questions people raise may be unjust; criticisms may be unfair; opinions may be bigoted; he may be pressured to go forward or hold back for bad reasons. But he should be able to answer, to his own satisfaction, the issues raised even by people with whom he may end up disagreeing.

There is lots of bad counsel around. It can say 'go' for bad reasons: "She's a cute chick"; "He's going to be in the 50% tax bracket"; "The Lord has told me you should marry him (her)." It can say 'no go' for bad reasons: "You'll lose your bachelor life and be tied down," "She's not Lithuanian like you are;" "I have a check in my spirit about it." One wants to weigh the reasons people give him for whatever course they think best.

There is also good counsel to be had. It helps one to carefully and prayerfully think through the decision. It sorts out whether his main reasons for marrying are self-centered, or if he knows how to commit himself to love someone else. Good counsel helps one identify potential problem areas and work on them now, before he is so committed that it would be an embarrassment to pull back. It helps one know he can solve problems biblically and face difficulties. It helps one know he is moving in the same direction. Good counsel helps him see his strengths and Christ's strength, and so gives him confidence to enter marriage with joy and optimism.

“The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice” (Proverbs 12:15). What do others who know the couple well think of this relationship? What do others think of their maturity? Of their plans and goals? Couples must not be too proud or too timid to ask for help.

For discussion: The couple should get others involved by seeking their counsel.

5. Does each candidate want to marry? Are both willing to marry each other just as they are?

The Bible tells us that the decision to marry is a choice we make. The final questions one should ask himself are: “Do I want to marry this person?” and “Does this person want to marry me?” Sometimes people think this kind of questioning is ‘unspiritual,’ as though God must reveal miraculously and mystically whether and whom one should marry. Marriage is a miracle! And God does lead His people! But He leads through giving us wisdom and allowing us to make real choices. Getting married is one’s choice. He is the one who will affirm his vow by saying, “I do.” No one—and no ‘leading’—can constrain or compel him to make such a vow. Likewise he must respect the integrity of the other person’s right and responsibility to make her own decision about him. We are neither robots nor puppets of each other or even of the Holy Spirit. We are children who live by faith, who have a tender and personal Shepherd and Father, who make choices based on biblical wisdom. The questions we have been suggesting presuppose that each individual will be the one to make the final commitment.

We stress this personal choice factor because we have seen people become very confused and led into unwarranted marriages because they were told by someone else, “I know it is God’s will for you to marry so-and-so,” or because their parents or someone else they respected pressured them. We have also seen people paralyzed with indecision because they thought they needed some special sign to confirm whether they should marry. The first four questions we proposed are meant to protect one from rushing into marriage based merely on wanting to. But there is an essential place to ask oneself, “Do I want to?”

I Corinthians 7:25-40 is the lengthiest passage in the Bible that explicitly speaks of how people decide to get married. It is filled with phrases such as: “he should do as he wants, he is not sinning,” “the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but who has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind;” “she is free to marry anyone she wishes,

but he must belong to the Lord.” Could it be any clearer? God expects the individual considering marriage to make the decision. And God promises to bless him and work out His will in his life through his decisions.

We have known couples who worked through the first four questions, and the whole process seemed to be ‘full speed ahead.’ When they got to the fifth question, however, after private, thoughtful reflection, one would say, “I really don’t want to marry at this time.” The only reason things got this far was, “My mother really wants me to get married,” or “My boyfriend has pressured me that it’s right,” or “We had sex and I feel guilty, obligated, and as though we were married already,” or “Everyone says we look great together and we’re made for each other, but . . . ,” or “I’ve been afraid if I pass up this chance I might never get another one.” Fear, guilt, social pressure and a twisted sense of fate are not reasons to get married. It is important to bring to the surface any reservation one may feel. Sometimes the reservations can be dealt with in such a way that the doubter becomes able to say “Yes” with a whole heart. Sometimes the reservations simply stand as a reason to say “No.” It is much better to say “No” before the engagement than to say twenty years in the marriage, “I went to the altar with secret doubts and I have lived with regrets ever since.”

Instead of harboring secret reservations, one needs to say a hearty “Yes.” Jesus says, “Let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no’ ” (Matthew 5:37). The time to decide whether one wants to marry is before his engagement. We have designed these five questions to be part of the pre-engagement thinking as well as of the counseling of a man and woman who have become friends and want to raise the marriage issue. Too often in our culture engagement is seen as a trial period where “I’m still deciding.” To be sure, engagement doesn’t mean that one is married or the decision is irreversible. Nonetheless, to view engagement as a trial period is quite foolish. Many couples could have avoided the pain and disgrace of broken engagements if they had asked themselves honestly these questions first. Every couple wants their time of engagement to be a time of growing joy and eager anticipation as they make decisions and plans together.

Reservations are not the only things that must be brought to the surface. Remember, one’s “Yes” is to a person, not to a fantasy woman or to “the man I hope he will become”! Every candidate must ask, “Am I willing to marry this person as he really is? Do I want to marry this person?” One must make sure that he is not coming to marriage with a hidden agenda, expecting to change the other person once they are married. Is the candidate saying “Yes” to a real person with weaknesses as well as strengths, sins as well as gifts?

It is liberating to say “Yes” and mean it. Therefore, we urge each couple to

take time to search their hearts and pray to the Lord. “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! . . . In everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:4-6). They should use this time to delight in the Lord, to cleanse their motives and put Him first in their lives, to be quiet before Him, to seek His wisdom, to pour out their hearts, to ask His blessing. Perhaps they should set aside a day for fasting and special prayer beyond their normal prayer times so that they can think, ask themselves questions, and ponder the implications of their decision. Out of this foundation they should make their decision, trusting in the Lord’s goodness to His children. “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” (Jeremiah 29:11).

For personal reflection: Does each want to marry the other?
Is each willing to marry him or her exactly as he or she is?

Conclusion:

Marriage is one of the greatest gifts of God to mankind. The union of the bride and bridegroom is rightly one of the supreme symbols of joy. We pray God will lead a great multitude to experience this joy. The time that one spends in reflecting on and discussing the questions we have raised is time that will be well spent. Every candidate is investing time in his future joy. The Bible says, “Godliness is of great value, both for the present life and the life to come” (I Timothy 4:8). Each of these questions will help one to grow in “godliness,” in thinking accurately and living skillfully. Each candidate will think about marriage with the living God—who gave His beloved Son Jesus to become our husband—at the center of his thoughts. Someday death will separate every couple, but each will be prepared even for that. They will have their joy firmly set in the life to come. If Christ is at the center of their life and marriage now, then even marriage itself will not be their goal in life. In hardships—even in death—they will have resources of hope, strength, and encouragement.

Does each candidate grasp that there is someone he is to love even more than his own prospective spouse? Jesus said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). Perhaps the couple thinks this is a curious way to end our discussion of whether they should get married! But hear Jesus out. Jesus loved His bride with an intensity and depth that is unequalled (see Ephesians 5:2 and 5:25 as well as Revelation 19:6-9). A

disciple of Jesus is someone learning how to love in the same way. If one loves Jesus more than his spouse, he will learn how to love that spouse with something of His intensity and depth. This is one of those beautiful paradoxes of biblical truth. If one loves and wants his spouse more than anything, he will end up selfish, fearful, bitter, or disillusioned. But if he loves Jesus more than anything else, he really will love and enjoy his spouse. He will be someone worth marrying! And that, after all, is the biggest question of all. Will each be a source of gladness to the other? With Jesus' help—yes!