

Biblical Principles for Solving Problems in the Home

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We live in a time of great marital discord and family disintegration. At the beginning of the twentieth century the divorce rate in America was under ten percent. By 1983 the divorce rate was just under fifty percent (the divorce rate has stood near fifty percent ever since the early 1980s). One would expect that with the great rise in the standard of living in the United States, families would be in a better state in the 1990s than they were in the 1890s. There is no question that, materially speaking, Americans are much better off than they were 100 years ago. The problems in the family in the late twentieth century are not economic but ethical and spiritual. The twentieth century in America is the century of unbelief and apostasy, the century in which secular humanism replaced Christianity as the predominant worldview. It is the children of those who rejected biblical Christianity in the 1930s and 40s who cast off all restraint. Thus, since the 1960s America experienced the youth rebellion, the so-called generation gap, the drug culture, the romanticization of socialism (the loony left), and the sexual revolution. While the political and cultural establishment of the 1950s was a hypocritical farce and justly needed to be questioned, the youth rebellion went beyond the questioning of political and cultural norms. Young people rejected Christianity and rejected God's ordained lawful means of preserving the family. The sexual revolution, with its premarital sex, pornography, adultery, homosexuality and easy, no-fault divorce has left in its wake broken families, untold heartaches, suicide, poverty and abortion (the American holocaust). "We have watched in horror and disbelief as the number of illegitimate births has climbed 400 percent, as divorce rates have quadrupled, as the incidence of domestic violence has increased 320 percent, as the percentage of children either abandoned or left to their own resources has quintupled, and as teen suicides have skyrocketed 200 percent."¹

The breakup of families and the problems associated with marital discord have not been without a response. America has a thriving pop-psychology industry that caters to the misery and heartaches of unhappy couples. There are literally thousands of books, hundreds of videos, and hundreds of seminars by pop-psychologists that deal with having a happy marriage. The problem with modern psychology and psychiatry is that they simply do not work.² The human philosophies and theories behind pop psychology are hostile to the Christian faith. The millions

¹ George Grant, *The Family Under Siege* (Bethany House, 1994), p. 35.

² Modern counseling practices do not work because modern psychology and psychiatry have unbiblical presuppositions regarding God, the Bible, man, sin, and so on. Jay Adams writes, "In counseling, as in every area of life, you usually find what you are looking for. Freud found sex behind all problems; Rogers discovers failure to live according to one's own best potential; Skinner uncovers bad training (conditioning). [One could add lack of self-esteem, bad environment, bad genetics, etc.]. Since this is so, it is of utmost importance for the counselor to begin with proper presuppositions. What he assumes is wrong is what he will find wrong. How crucial it is, then, to examine one's presuppositions to be certain that they are biblical. Since proper presuppositions about God and man can only be found in the Scriptures, counseling based upon any other foundation cannot be trusted. Only the counselor who knows and trusts the Word of God can look for that which God wants him to find" (*The Big Umbrella* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979], p. 50). The role of modern psychology and psychiatry should be to look for, diagnose and treat problems relating to the physical (e.g., brain damage, tumors, birth defects, etc.) and the organic (e.g., chemical imbalances that distort perception, etc.). Physical and organic problems of the brain are indeed quite rare. The ethical realm (i.e., sin and its consequences) is for the Christian pastor and elder to attend to—not an anti-Christian secular priesthood.

upon millions of dollars spent on these books and seminars have accomplished nothing but harm. The Christian church existed for 1800 years without psychology and psychiatry. Family harmony and righteousness were far greater among the seventeenth-century Puritans than among today's evangelicals. Christians must realize that psychologists and psychiatrists are a type of secular priesthood. When Christianity was cast off, psychologists and psychiatrists rushed in to fill the role once held by Bible-believing pastors. To solve the sin problems that occur in the family we must avoid syncretism with pagan theories and depend solely upon God's Word. "God will not patch his grace onto some humanistic psychological nonsense—even if that nonsense is couched and buried in Christian terminology."³ There is no neutrality. The problems of the family are ethical and spiritual; therefore, we must focus our attention on the Bible and pray for wisdom and the enabling power of the Holy Spirit to sanctify our families before God.

If people want to have a good marriage relationship and solve the problems that arise within the home, they must first believe in Jesus Christ and make Him Lord of their marriage relationship. When God created Adam and Eve, He created them holy and righteous. Without sin, they dwelt in perfect communion with God. Before their fall Adam and Eve had perfect harmony within their relationship. But even before the fall, Adam and Eve were dependent upon God. They lived in fellowship and communion with God and walked and talked with God daily in the garden. The first marriage relationship, which serves as a pattern for all subsequent marriage relationships, was a marriage based upon both the vertical relationship (communion with God) and the horizontal (communion and relationship with each other). Adam and Eve were dependent upon God's communion, fellowship and revelation (communication) at every point in their marriage relationship. If Adam and Eve who were at that time without sin needed communion with God, we who are fallen and sinful are even more dependent upon Him. In the post-fall world we can only approach God through Jesus Christ His only begotten Son. Therefore, those who place self-fulfillment, pleasure and marriage before Christ actually harm the marriage relationship. Thus, the first principle for having a good marriage and for solving problems in the home is to believe in Jesus Christ and make Him Lord of your marriage.

When husbands and wives believe in Christ and submit to Him as Lord, they adopt His Word the Bible as the blueprint for life and marriage. Christian spouses have an incredible advantage over unbelievers in their relationship. Every human relationship needs a source of authority outside itself that is transcendent, infallible, and authoritative. That is exactly what Christians have in the Bible! The Bible gives the husband a Spirit-inspired, perfect manual for leadership; it gives the wife an infallible source of authority above her husband. Unbelievers must depend on arbitrary, human authority. The unbelieving wife does not have a source of infallible authority above her husband to appeal to when her husband is unfair and acts like a dictator. The Christian wife has incredible freedom and liberty that women married to unbelievers do not have. The Christian husband cannot tell his wife to do something contrary to Scripture. The husband must love his wife as Christ loved the church (Eph. 5:25). Thus, the Bible must be the blueprint, the constitution, the source of authority in the marriage relationship. The opposite of obedience to God's Word is not freedom but slavery. "The humanistic relativism of modern man dissolves the ties between man and woman as far as any objective law and value are concerned and reduces them to purely relative and personal ties. Now a purely *personal* tie is *impersonal* in its view of other people. A man whose judgment is governed by his personal considerations only does not consider the personal considerations of other people except insofar

³ Doug Wilson, *Reforming Marriage* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon, 1995), p. 9.

as they can be used to further his own end.”⁴ The abandonment of biblical law for humanistic law leads to exploitation. The overarching concern for obedience to God and His glory is replaced by self-fulfillment. Self-fulfillment, as defined by modern, secular man, is nothing more than the selfish exploitation of another. “Man exploits women, and women exploit men. If a woman ages she is abandoned, if the man’s income wanes, he is deserted if a better opportunity presents itself.”⁵

Communication in the Home

“Communication is fundamental to a Christ-centered home because it is the means by which a husband-wife relationship and parent-child relationship is established, grows, and is maintained.”⁶ Communication is crucial if there is going to be intimacy and cooperation in the marriage relationship. Marriage was created for procreation, dominion, and helpful companionship.⁷ Christian marriage should be an edifying and pleasurable experience. The Christian husband and wife should be working together as one toward the same goals. Communication is important because it is the biblical means whereby the husband and wife apply the Word of God to the marriage relationship, and thus help each other become better servants of Christ. The husband and wife have a day-by-day, objective, behind-closed-doors look at the speech and behavior of each other. “As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend” (Pr. 27:17). “Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?” (Am. 3:3). Thus, if communication is functioning properly and biblical principles are being applied to the problems that arise, Christian marriage will lead to mutual growth and sanctification.

Many problems in the home are a direct result of poor communication. While both husband and wife are responsible to communicate truthfully, effectively and biblically with each other, the husband is the head of the household and thus carries the primary responsibility in ensuring that biblical communication is taking place in the home. The husband must take charge. He is the one that is ultimately responsible for what occurs in the home; thus, he must be the one who takes the initiative in the relationship. Do you want to increase your marital harmony, fellowship, love and sanctification? Biblical principles of communication are the key.

Honesty

The first biblical principle for effective communication in the home is honesty. Communication must be truthful: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Ex. 20:16). Paul says that we are to “speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). John says that our love must be expressed “in deed and in truth” (1 Jn. 3:18). “Therefore, putting away lying, each one speak truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another” (Eph. 4:25). Lying is a

⁴ R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), p. 339.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 388.

⁶ Jay E. Adams, *Christian Living in the Home* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972), p. 28.

⁷ A passage of Scripture that speaks of the combined strength of two friends also applies to marriage. Many husbands know that they would not be where they are, emotionally, physically and spiritually, without their godly Christian wives. “Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone?” (Eccl. 4:9-11; note: all Scriptures NASB, unless otherwise indicated).

contradiction in a number of ways. It is a sin against God and brings His displeasure and chastisement. Lying destroys the trust between husband and wife.

Everyone knows someone who is a habitual liar. What happens when the liar does tell the truth? People do not trust such a person, even when he is telling the truth. A husband and wife are supposed to have the most intimate human relationship possible. But if one or both parties are lying, useful communication is clouded by doubt. Communication under such circumstances degenerates into pleasantries, small talk and saying what one thinks the other person wants to hear. The deep, intimate, searching communication necessary to a deep, intimate marriage are lost. The wife loses respect for her husband and the husband cannot depend on his wife as a biblical helpmeet when deception occurs in his speech.

Furthermore, lying hurts the feelings of the one who is lied to. Lying implicitly says, "You are unimportant. I cannot trust you to help me with this problem in my time of need." It implicitly says, "I don't want to be open and intimate with you. There are areas of my life that are off-limits to you." "Deception is a serious barrier to communication. Lying obviously destroys credibility and violates trust. But more subtle means of obscuring the truth may also prevent effective communication. When we begin to play hide-and-seek in marriage, the most important context God provided for openness, we are in trouble. The marital game of deception is established on the false premise that 'What she [he] doesn't know, won't hurt her [him].'"⁸

Christian marriage requires total honesty. If the husband and wife are working together for the same biblical goal of dominion, godly children and helpful companionship, then lying doesn't make any sense. Lying implies separate goals and agendas. Often lying is a sign of deeper problems. It is often used to cover one's tracks. If a man is spending money illicitly (e.g., gambling, pornography, booze, etc.), and the wife asks where that fifty dollars went, the unrepentant husband lies to hide his sinful behavior from his wife. Under such circumstances a spouse should get help from a Christian friend and, if necessary, go to the elders of the church.

Openness

Effective communication in a marriage also requires openness. Communication must be honest. But there must also be a willingness to communicate. The best way to get to know one another and avoid misunderstandings is to have open communication. Christians are not mind readers. Husbands and wives should not have to guess what each other is thinking. Paul says, "Who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of a man, which is in him?" (1 Cor. 2:11). The only way for us to reveal our thoughts to one another is to speak, to communicate.

Although both the husband and wife are responsible to communicate and be open with each other, it is the husband's responsibility, as leader of the household, to ensure that the channels of communication are continually open. If necessary, the husband must take the initiative to ensure that a spirit of openness exists in the relationship. He should make sure that time is spent each day in one-on-one conversation with his wife. In order for this to occur, the husband may find it necessary to restrict the amount of television the family watches (while a certain amount of relaxation is necessary for one's health, the average American watches inordinate amounts of T.V. and watches the wrong kinds of T.V.). He may have to restrict the amount of time he spends with his friends. The husband who comes home from work and sits in

⁸ R. C. Sproul, *The Intimate Marriage*, p. 13.

front of the T.V. every night for hours and then spends his weekends hunting and fishing with his buddies certainly is not communicating effectively with his wife. He is not loving his wife as Christ loved the church (Eph. 5:25). The husband may find it necessary to restrict his wife's extra activities. The wife who spends several nights out a week with friends, playing bridge or even attending church activities, is not going to have the intimate, open communication that Christian marriage requires.

The husband and wife should work at open communication until it becomes a habit in the relationship. This will involve putting into place a number of simple principles. An important element in open communication is listening to each other carefully. This means paying attention—no daydreaming. Husbands and wives should not give the impression that what the other has to say is unimportant or stupid. It also means asking questions. If a spouse does not understand what has been said they should ask questions until the other's thought is fully understood. If one is married to a person who is very quiet and not naturally open, one should gently ask questions to stimulate conversation.

Another important element in open communication is the need to be clear and direct in one's speech. Husbands and wives must avoid being vague and indirect in communication. Beating around the bush and speaking ambiguously leave one open to misunderstanding and miscommunication. For example, a woman who is about to go to the hairdresser asks her husband how he would like her to have her hair styled. The husband would like it styled a certain way but says, "Have it done however you want, dear." If, when his wife returns from the hairdresser, he is disappointed, whose fault is it? It is his fault. The wife communicated effectively but the husband did not reveal his true thoughts. Spouses who do not reveal their thoughts on an issue because they do not think it is important (or are afraid to offend) create problems. Miscommunication can lead to anger, resentment and arguments over issues that really are inconsequential. When couples are not open and honest with each other, minor problems fester and develop into major blowups. Unresolved issues pile up in the marriage relationship until the problems seem unmanageable. Marriage counselors are constantly hearing husbands and wives say to their spouses: "Why didn't you tell me about that?" "Why didn't you tell me that bothered you?" "Why didn't you just ask me to do such and such?" The principle of open communication is so simple, yet it is commonly violated in our day. It is tragic that many marriages have failed over something so simple yet necessary. Husbands and wives should not be afraid to speak openly and clearly, as long as they do so in a gentle, loving manner. It's time to stop the guessing game, trying to read each other's minds, trying to read in between the lines. Marital communication should not be a puzzle or enigma; it should be open and clear.

With open communication husbands and wives will not only avoid misunderstandings and unnecessary arguments but will also get to know each other more and more as time progresses. The focus for couples in our pagan society has been on entertainment and sensuality. Couples are dancing, going to movies, partying and having a lot of sex. As a consequence, many American newlyweds know a lot about each other's anatomy but little about each other's mind. Couples need to study each other; getting to know each other is a top priority. "The television series *The Newlywed Game*, and other shows that match husbands' and wives' answers, seem funny, but really they are tragic. They reveal not the rare or unusual but the commonplace. They provide an ominous warning that couples simply do not know each other. People are not doing their homework."⁹

⁹ *The Intimate Marriage*, p. 16.

Biblical Speech

Husbands and wives must not only be honest and open, they must be honest and open in a biblical manner. A person can be open and honest, yet hurt others with his speech. Paul says, “Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one” (Col. 4:6). The Christian has a responsibility to speak in a way that promotes healing and leads to edification. What kind of speech is more biblical for the man whose wife is overweight: “You’re a fat, bloated pig. You look like a cow.” Or “Honey, I’m concerned about your health; I think it would be a good idea for you to lose some weight.” The answer is obvious. “There is one who speaks like the piercings of a sword, but the tongue of the wise promotes health” (Pr. 12:18). “Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the bones” (Pr. 16:24). “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver” (Pr. 25:11). The Apostle Paul had much more in mind than curse words when he said, “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” (Eph. 4:29). “Paul is talking about words that tear people apart. Such speech consists of unkind words, words that cause and complicate problems rather than solve problems. These are words that cut and slice, the kinds of words that were natural to the former manner of life.... Instead of using unwholesome, rotten, cutting words, a Christian must speak words that ‘edify’ (build up). They should be constructive rather than destructive words; they should build up instead of tear down.... Wholesome words are those which are directed toward the problem that has arisen (literally, ‘the present need’) in order to help those who hear. If a brother has been doing something wrong he needs help. He doesn’t need tearing down, he needs building up.”¹⁰ When husbands and wives are honest, open and speak biblically, real communication occurs. The misunderstandings, irritations, sins and problems that occur in the marriage relationship are dealt with and eliminated daily, because couples are attacking problems—not each other.

Anger

One of the greatest hindrances to communication in the home is uncontrolled anger. The unwholesome words that Paul condemns are usually the result of anger. “Anger is a problem for every Christian: sinful anger probably is involved in 90 percent of all counseling problems.”¹¹ Jay Adams describes the woman married to a man who cannot control his temper as living at the foot of an active volcano: one never knows when it’s going to blow. D. James Kennedy describes people with a short fuse as those who “may speak the truth, but they are about as loving as a bucketful of hydrochloric acid.” Uncontrolled anger destroys communication and problem-solving in the marriage relationship. When couples attack each other, instead of the problem, the lines of edifying communication are severed.

¹⁰ Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), pp. 228-29.

¹¹ Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor’s Manual* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), p. 359.

Righteous vs. Unrighteous Anger

When dealing with anger in the marriage relationship one must keep in mind that anger in and of itself is not sinful. Jesus was angry with those who sold merchandise in the temple. He was also angry with the Pharisees. Yet He never committed sin. The Psalmist says, “God judgeth the righteous, and *God is angry* with the wicked every day” (Ps. 7:11, KJV). The Apostle Paul exhorts Christians to “be angry and do not sin” (Eph. 4:26). Anger is a God-given emotion which is good if used biblically. It is sinful if it leads to unrighteous behavior or speech. It is also sinful if it is based on a false standard of righteousness.

One way of avoiding sinful anger in the marriage relationship is to make sure that you are not holding your spouse up to a false standard. One of the main reasons that Jesus was hated by the Jewish leaders in His day was because the Jews had a false interpretation of God’s law based on human tradition. When Jesus was the object of the Jews’ seething hatred because He healed a man on the Sabbath, He said: “Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment” (Jn. 7:24). The obvious implication of His statement is that if the Jews truly understood the law of Moses they would not have been angry with His actions. Anger that is not based on a violation of God’s law is arbitrary and unjustified. Thus it is important that husbands and wives study and understand God’s Word, so that they are not guilty of unjustified anger. The husband who is angry with his wife because she is not a gourmet cook, has small breasts, or doesn’t like to play golf is guilty of unrighteous anger. The wife who is angry with her husband because he is not wealthy, six foot-four, or the smartest person in town is guilty of unrighteous anger. God gave man the ability to become angry in order to motivate him to biblical action against *sinful* behavior. Anger based on self-law, covetousness and pride is sinful and must be repented of.

Avoiding Prejudging

Another form of unrighteous anger is that based on inadequate information. Often husbands and wives become angry with one another because of perceived wrongs that never even occurred. A spouse will judge his mate falsely because he lacks the necessary information to properly assess the situation. The Bible condemns this behavior as judging a matter before it is heard: “He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him” (Pr. 18:13). The biblical injunction to be slow to anger has a two-fold application. First, a person must be slow to anger in order to control his temper: “A quick tempered man acts foolishly” (Pr. 14:17). But there is also the element of taking the time to properly assess the situation. This involves being “quick to hear.” “But let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger” (Jas. 1:19). Husbands and wives need to be slow to speak and quick to hear in order to receive the information necessary to respond biblically to the situation. How many husbands have become angry, lost control and yelled at their wives over totally imaginary offenses? If your wife goes shopping and comes home an hour late for an important dinner engagement, don’t immediately blow your stack and start yelling at her. Remain calm and ask questions until you have the necessary information to ascertain what occurred. If she had a flat tire or got stuck in traffic, your anger is completely unjustified. Even if your wife is guilty of some offense, anger must be controlled and directed at the problem. “Do not go out hastily to argue your case; otherwise, what will you do in the end, when your neighbor puts you to shame?” (Pr. 25:8). “He who restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding” (Pr.

17:27). Never render a judgment in your mind against your spouse unless you know all the facts regarding the situation. Do not assume you know what your spouse is thinking. Do not assume that you know your spouse's motives or opinions regarding a situation without first communicating and receiving the necessary information verbally. Do not prejudge. Remain calm, ask questions and give your spouse the benefit of the doubt. "Let us pursue the things which make for peace and building up of one another" (Rom. 14:19). Remember, only God knows the heart. "For I know their works and their thoughts" (Isa. 66:18). We should never play God by assuming we know our spouse's thoughts.

Controlling Anger

Husbands and wives should never hold up their spouse to an arbitrary standard of righteousness. They should never prejudge each other's actions or motives. But how should they deal with anger that is justified? What should you do when real sin occurs, and righteousness indignation follows? The Bible teaches that Christians must control their anger. The anger should be used to motivate you to right action. Instead of losing your temper and blowing up (or clamming up and giving your spouse the silent treatment), you should focus your attention on the problem. "Christians must learn to attack the problem at hand, not each other."¹² If anger is controlled and directed at the sin (and the problems that arise from sin) then the sins will be acknowledged and confessed. This is followed by forgiveness and reconciliation.

Husbands and wives who do not control their anger end up attacking each other instead of the problem. Uncontrolled anger leads to strife, contentions and other serious problems in the marital relationship. The biblical portrayal of man who vents his anger is truly abysmal. The man who does not have control his anger does not have understanding. He is defenseless. He doesn't have discretion. He acts hastily. He stirs up strife and contentions. He abounds in transgression and will inevitably suffer punishment. Uncontrolled anger is what turns minor disagreements into shouting matches. It is not only the cause of serious verbal abuse but also the starting point for physical abuse and even murder. Uncontrolled anger is sinful and foolish because its purpose is not to heal and edify but to hurt. Raising one's voice, yelling, screaming, name-calling, hasty generalization, bringing up past sins and threats—all are used to hurt one's spouse. Christian marriage is not a debating society where husbands and wives win points by trying to win arguments, whatever the cost. Those who want to avoid a breakdown in communication, bitterness and resentment must control their anger.

The first step in controlling anger is to remain quiet and avoid the urge to blow up in order to consider a biblical response to the situation. People given to blowing up have often been told to remain quiet and count to 10 (or 20, if necessary). The husband or wife who is tempted to respond to anger in an unbiblical manner should memorize all the passages in Scripture that discuss controlling anger. (Even before all the passages are memorized, write them down on 3-by-5 cards for quick reference in time of need. When you are tempted to blow up, you should quietly meditate on appropriate passages of Scripture). The husband that is given to emotional outbursts should explain to his wife that he is learning to replace blowing up with dealing with the situation biblically; therefore, she should understand that he needs some time to meditate on Scripture in order to avoid a blowup. Likewise, the wife who is given to clamming up (i.e., the silent treatment) should also memorize the anger passages. She must learn that cutting off

¹² *Competent to Counsel*, p. 230.

communication is not the way to solve problems and bring healing to the relationship. The first step should be faithfully practiced until remaining quiet and looking toward the Scriptures for solutions becomes a habit. The goal is rehabilitation. One must put off blowing up or clanging and put on a quiet, well-reasoned, scriptural response to the situation.¹³

The second step is to direct the energy from one's anger toward solving the problem. When husbands and wives get angry, they often direct the anger at each other, instead of at the problem that causes the anger. The result is an argument in which the problem is ignored, while the husband and wife attack each other with bringing past sins, hasty generalizations (e.g., "You always," "You never," etc.), outright insults (e.g., "Yea, well you're a fat, bloated pig," etc.), and so on. Such argumentation is useless and counterproductive because it does not lead to growth in the marriage relationship. Instead of losing one's temper and trying to punish and hurt one's spouse, or attempting to win an argument that is going nowhere, the husband or wife should focus their attention on the problem. The unbiblical word or actions that led to the anger should be dealt with calmly, directly and biblically. For example, Bob asked his wife to run an important errand for him, but his wife decided that she had other things to do that were more pressing. Thus, she deliberately disobeyed her husband. Bob was very angry. Not only did his wife disobey him but she had a habit of disregarding his instructions when she believed more important things needed to be done. Bob's wife sinned against him, and he had every right to be angry, but instead of blowing his stack and yelling at his wife in an attempt to punish her and hurt her feelings, he responded biblically. He sat down and calmly explained why what she did was sinful; that she must obey her husband, and that she needs to repent and ask for forgiveness. Anger should not be used to attack one's spouse in order to punish and hurt. What is needed is to identify the sinful behavior and discuss what can be done to put it off in order to replace it with godly behavior. When a husband or wife does something to anger the other, the result should not be a fight but a discussion of which biblical principles apply, and what can be done to put off the sinful behavior in order to replace it with godly behavior.¹⁴ Attacking one's spouse is sinful and self-centered. Real love helps one's partner eliminate irritating sinful behavior and gives God the honor due Him. The husband is commanded to love his wife just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it (Eph. 5:25). He must do everything he can to help his wife be a better

¹³ *The Christian Counselor's Manual*, p. 356. Those Christians who claim that they simply cannot control their anger should be reminded of the fact that virtually everyone (even rank heathen) has learned to restrain their outbursts under certain circumstances. It is indeed quite rare for married couples to engage in verbal assaults and shouting matches in public (e.g., the shopping mall, post office, restaurant, etc.). But people often "let it all hang out" in front of their families. When Christian couples control themselves in public yet refuse to control themselves in private they prove that their claim not to be able to control their anger is untrue. It is sinful and shameful that some Christians will act "civilized" in front of unbelievers and then act like raving idiots in front of their families. They lack self-control at home because they *refuse* to control themselves. They need to repent.

¹⁴ One of the greatest examples in the Bible of a person using biblical principles to defuse anger is the case of Abigail (1 Sam. 25). Her husband Nabal greatly angered David by refusing a just request and insulting David's house. David was so angry that he intended to kill Nabal and all his men (although he was justly angered, his planned response of committing murder was totally unjustified). What did Abigail do to appease David's wrath? First she went out to meet David—the situation required direct personal contact. Then she humbled herself in David's presence and admitted that he had been wronged. She agreed with him that Nabal was wrong. She did not make excuses or attempt to shift blame but confessed openly that David had been wronged. How could David disagree and argue with Abigail when she placed herself on his side? She spoke kindly and gently to David. She did not sweep David's unbiblical response to anger under the rug but gave glory to God for preventing him from taking sinful vengeance. She gave David and his men a gift ("A gift in secret subdues anger," Pr. 21:14). Then she asked him for forgiveness and complimented him and his house. David was so amazed at Abigail's wisdom that he blessed God and Abigail. In this one chapter, practically every biblical technique for dealing with anger is demonstrated.

Christian. Hurtful arguments must be replaced with problem-directed communication that leads to mutual sanctification and reconciliation.

The third step involves a genuine confession and reconciliation. After discussing the problem, one party should admit guilt, make restitution if necessary, and apologize without making excuses or blame-shifting. The other party should accept the apology and promise to help in any way possible with the problem. Since all sin is ultimately against God, confession should also be made to Him. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn. 1:9). A common error committed during this third step is to engage in excuse making or blame-shifting: “I didn’t get enough sleep last night.” “Things are really tough at work and I’m under a lot of pressure.” “The kids were getting on my nerves.” “I really didn’t mean it.” “I was so hungry I couldn’t help it.” “If you didn’t ask me to go to the store, I wouldn’t have wrecked the car.” These are destructive of a real confession because they imply that a person is not responsible for his bad behavior. If the individual is not really responsible, then there is no such thing as sin, only environmentally-caused accidents. Making excuses and blame-shifting destroys real repentance because if a person could not help himself then repentance is impossible. “He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy” (Pr. 28:13). While it may seem kind to accept an excuse and move on, in reality it hinders growth in the marriage relationship. When sins are swept under the rug, they are not dealt with properly. If your spouse is mingling excuses and blame-shifting with his confession, you must politely remind him that God does not accept excuses for sinful behavior. “Sin disrupts relationships. Sin never ‘blows over.’ If the mere passage of time could deal with the problem of sin, the Son of God died for no reason. Christian men must confess their sins to their wives. Christian women must confess their sins to their husbands.”¹⁵ “Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (Jas. 5:16).

After the problem is discussed and genuine confession takes place the husband or wife must be forgiven. Forgiving a repentant spouse is not optional; it is required by Jesus Christ: “‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven’” (Mt. 18:21-22). “But if you do not forgive, neither will your father in heaven forgive your trespasses” (Mk. 11:25-26). Genuine forgiveness is crucial; for without it, reconciliation has not occurred. The problem is left unresolved. Paul says, “Do not let the sun go down on your wrath” (Eph. 4:26). The Bible clearly teaches that husbands and wives must be reconciled the very same day that the problem occurred; it cannot be put off until the next day. True forgiveness must be extended to your spouse, even when the offense was great. If forgiveness is not extended, then all the preceding steps were in vain; reconciliation has not taken place.

When you forgive your spouse you must no longer hold the sin against him. That means you don’t dwell on it, you don’t hold a grudge. You don’t bring it up again to your spouse or anyone else. When Christians develop the habit of constructive, problem-solving discussion, followed by confession and forgiveness, they nip more serious problems in the bud. They also grow spiritually, and have peace and joy in their relationship. “When a couple is in fellowship with one another, there is, in principle, no problem too great for them to work through together. It is therefore necessary to keep the marriage free of those sins which are a hindrance to fellowship.”¹⁶

¹⁵ *Reforming Marriage*, pp. 58-59.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

Clamming Up

There can be no biblical discussion of anger without considering the spouse who clams up after becoming angry. While virtually everyone recognizes that blowing one's stack is unacceptable behavior, many people do not recognize that clamming up (commonly referred to as the silent treatment) is also highly destructive of relationships. Clamming up (like blowing up) does not lead to constructive problem-solving; in fact, it is often used to punish one's spouse. When a spouse locks his anger inside, he not only cuts off constructive communication but also harbors a reservoir of resentment against his spouse. When someone internalizes anger and refuses to deal with the problem that caused the anger, unresolved problems pile up. The unresolved problems and the bitterness and resentment they cause destroy fellowship and joy in the marriage relationship.

Serious marital problems are often the result of minor problems piling up. When problems and bitterness pile up, it sometimes gets to the point where the husband and wife do not even know where to begin. It is not uncommon for biblical counselors to encounter couples who are fighting over unresolved issues that are six and more years old. The resentment from the unresolved problems has poisoned the relationship. Therefore, it is often necessary for couples who are having difficulties in the present to deal with unresolved problems from the past. This will include confession and forgiveness. "When sins are confessed, it is like picking something up that was dropped on the carpet. If a person learns to pick things up immediately, a thousand things can be dropped on the carpet, and the home will still remain clean. But if things are only picked up once every six months, the result will be an overwhelming house cleaning job. To continue the illustration, some homes are so messed up that those responsible for cleaning simply do not know where to start. They do not necessarily like the way it is, but they are simply overwhelmed. But such things always accumulate *one at a time*. If they had been picked up as fast as they had been dropped, then the home would have remained clean."¹⁷

The Bible forbids holding anger within. The spouse who clams up must learn to direct the anger toward problem solving and reconciliation. Paul says, "Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity" (Eph. 4:26-27). Paul warns Christians that if anger is not dealt with *immediately* and resolved biblically, then believers are giving the devil an opportunity.¹⁸ How many people have done things in anger that they later regretted? The spouse who has the habit of clamming up must put off the silent treatment and start communicating until the problem is resolved.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁸ A biblical example of internalizing anger and giving the devil an opportunity is set forth in Gen. 4. "But for Cain and for his offering He had no regard. So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell. Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry? And why had your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it.'" God had no regard for Cain's offering, for God required a blood sacrifice. Cain became very angry. He internalized the anger and became depressed. Cain was angry at God and his brother. God who is rich in mercy went to Cain and spoke gently to him. He told Cain that the way to get out of his depression was to obey God and do the right thing. Cain gave God the silent treatment. God went to Cain and communicated in a kind way. Cain refused to listen and ignored God's advice. The result was the murder of his brother, righteous Abel. It is interesting that often after an employee goes berserk and shoots several fellow-employees, his neighbors often say, "He was such a quiet, mild, friendly guy." Yes, but only on the outside!

The spouse who is guilty of clamming up must be asked to speak. He or she must be gently reminded that problems can only be solved through biblical communication. He must be reminded that clamming up leads to other sinful activity (e.g., bitterness, hatred, etc.). If your spouse has become angry and clammed up, you should communicate in a calm and gentle way that you are aware of the anger, and that clamming up is an unbiblical way to respond to anger. Sit down with your spouse and ask a series of gentle questions to elicit communication. For example, “Honey, I know that you are angry and you are giving me the silent treatment. I want you to know that I love you, and that we cannot effectively deal with the problem until you are willing to communicate. God wants us to work on the problem together. Don’t you think that is a good idea?” “The wise in heart shall be called prudent: and the sweetness of the lips increaseth learning” (Pr. 16:21). Once the channel of communication is open, the problem can be dealt with. Then confession, forgiveness and reconciliation can follow.¹⁹

Avoiding Useless Arguments

If you are married to someone who does not control his temper, there are biblical principles that you can use to avoid useless arguments. The worst thing a person can do is to respond to uncontrolled anger with uncontrolled anger of his own. This leads to an escalation of hostilities between both parties. Such arguments increase both in volume and in hurtful speech. C. H. Spurgeon said, “It is useless to try to end a quarrel by getting angry over it; it is much the same as pouring oil on a fire to quench it, and blowing coals with the bellows to put them out.” Anger-driven arguments have a tendency to spiral out of control. “The beginning of strife is like letting out water” (Pr. 17:14). “One hot word...begets another, and that a third, and so on, till it proves like the cutting of a dam; when the water has got a little passage it does itself widen the breach, bears down all before it, and there is then no stopping it, no reducing it.”²⁰ Therefore it is crucial to respond to uncontrolled anger biblically, before the dam breaks.

The biblical way to respond to uncontrolled anger is to give a soft answer. “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Pr. 15:1). A gentle or soft answer refers to the sound level of an answer, as well as the content of an answer. “There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing” (Pr. 12:18). You must answer in such a way as to subdue the anger of your spouse. This means taking the time to answer carefully. Don’t blurt out the first thing that comes to mind but carefully reflect on a biblical response. “The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours forth evil” (Pr. 15:28). One method of subduing wrath is to find a point of

¹⁹ Another example of a soft answer turning away wrath is as follows: Bob and Nancy are having company over for dinner. The house needs to be vacuumed and groceries need to be brought. Bob promises Nancy that he will vacuum the floor while she does the shopping. After Nancy leaves, Bob remembers that an excellent college football game is in progress. He becomes glued to the tube and completely forgets his promise to vacuum the floor. When Nancy arrives she notices that the floor is not vacuumed and Bob is watching T.V. Nancy loses her temper and raising her voice says, “Thanks a lot, you lazy bum. You never help around the house.” If Bob was to respond in a loud, angry manner, a bad argument would follow. But Bob cuts an argument off at the pass with a soft, conciliatory answer. “I’m sorry, dear, I’ll shut the T.V. off and do it right now.” Bob’s soft answer makes it very difficult, if not impossible, for an argument to develop. Because of Bob’s gentle, reasoned response, Nancy calms down, and they both communicate effectively. Bob’s promise-breaking and Nancy’s uncontrolled anger are confessed, and a full reconciliation occurs. Bob and Nancy avoid a nasty, prolonged argument; instead, they communicate, “make up” and have a nice dinner with their friends. “It is an honor for a man to keep aloof from strife; but every fool will be quarrelling” (Pr. 20:3, RSV). “Leave off contention, before it is meddled with” (Pr. 17:14).

²⁰ Matthew Henry’s Commentary, 3:889.

agreement (if possible) within your spouse's accusation or verbal attack. If you agree with a point of accusation made by your husband or wife, it makes it very difficult for your spouse to continue the argument. For example: "Yes, dear, you're right; I should have removed that dead tree before it had a chance to fall on the car. Let's sit down and discuss ways I can learn to not procrastinate in the future." The point is not to sweep one's spouse's uncontrolled anger under the rug but rather subdue it, in order to facilitate genuine communication instead of a useless argument. Uncontrolled anger cannot be dealt with until problem-solving communication is restored.

There are times when a spouse becomes angry because of a genuine misunderstanding. Even if your spouse's anger is not based on reality (e.g., he thought you said or did something, but in fact you did not), you must maintain control of your anger. It is easy to lose your temper or become defensive when the accusations made against you are false. Obviously, under such circumstances, you cannot confess and apologize for something you did not do. Instead of blowing up, clamming up or going on the defensive, in a calm manner make it clear that your spouse's anger is misdirected. Tell your spouse the truth regarding the situation, but do so with a soft answer (one that diffuses anger and avoids an argument). For example, "I'm sorry, dear, that you misunderstood what I said regarding such and such. My real intent was...." Or "I'm sorry that I did not make myself clear regarding such and such; let me clarify that for you. There is no reason to be upset, dear." You should not sweep uncontrolled anger under the carpet; couples must first control their anger before discussing any problems. If anger is not brought under control, a harmful, hurtful argument will follow.

Miscommunications and misunderstandings are inevitable in a marriage relationship; therefore, it is important that spouses learn to give each other the benefit of the doubt. "He who guards his mouth and his tongue, guards his soul from troubles" (Pr. 21:23). "Scorners set a city aflame, but wise men turn away anger" (Pr. 29:8). You must regard your spouse as more important than yourself (Phil. 2:3). You should give your spouse the benefit of the doubt and drop the issue, unless there has been clear pattern of deception in the past regarding the same issue. If an obvious pattern of deception has occurred, you may find it necessary to seek help from a third party (e.g., your pastor or an elder in your church).

There are Christians who are married to unbelievers and there are Christians who are married to professing Christians who act like unbelievers. What should a Christian do who is married to someone who doesn't care what the Bible says about anger and hurtful speech? What should a husband or wife do whose spouse rejects a soft answer? What if you are married to someone who likes to argue? What if an argument seems unavoidable? No matter how obnoxious your spouse is, you must still exercise self-control and answer in a soft manner. It takes two to tango; it also takes two to maintain an argument. When you find yourself in a situation where your spouse tries to engage you in a hurtful argument, you must simply refuse to argue. Gently make it clear that you are unwilling to argue and engage in hurtful speech. For example, "Bob, I would like to discuss this issue with you, but if you insist on raising your voice and making insults, then I will not discuss the issue until you are willing to do so in a calm, biblical manner. We cannot solve the problem if we are attacking each other. Let's sit down and work on the problem. God doesn't want us to fight." "Pleasant words are as a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones" (Pr. 16:24). If you refuse to quarrel because you are guilty of an offense, then you should confess your guilt, apologize, and ask for forgiveness. Once you have sincerely confessed your guilt and asked for forgiveness, your spouse must forgive. Real forgiveness involves reconciliation not a tongue-lashing.

If you are married to an unbeliever, resolving conflicts becomes more difficult because your spouse may reject or even hate the Word God. Yet even in such difficult circumstances you are responsible to obey God. The key to winning over an unbelieving husband is not to nag him but to be a good Christian wife. “Likewise you wives, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the Word, they without a word, may be won by the *conduct* of their wives, when they observe your *chaste conduct* accompanied by fear. Do not let your beauty be that outward adorning of arranging of hair, of wearing gold, or of putting on fine apparel; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible ornament of a *gentle and quiet spirit*, which is very precious in the sight of God” (1 Pet. 3:1-4). Although Peter is not specifically dealing with anger he does apply the same principles in order to win over one’s spouse. A soft answer is used to win over an angry spouse. A wife must be submissive, chaste in conduct, with a *gentle and quiet spirit*, to win over her unbelieving husband. The Proverbs deal with the circumstances of anger while Peter discusses a continuous lifestyle geared to win over an unbelieving husband. A meek and quiet wife pleases God. A loud, argumentative, intemperate wife will turn her husband away from the faith because she is a hypocrite. “It is better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and angry woman” (Pr. 21:19).

Developing Godly Habits

The purpose of replacing sinful and unwise habits of communication with biblical habits of communication is to glorify God and sanctify the marriage relationship. Greater intimacy, love and joy are just some of the benefits that will follow. One must keep in mind that sinful habits of communicating and dealing with anger have usually been practiced for many years; therefore, one must not expect instantaneous change in these areas. It will take time, effort and practice to replace years of habitual sin patterns with godly patterns of behavior. You must be patient and not give up. These changes are required by God; they are not suggestions. You must change your sinful behavior. “A Christian sins if he becomes a static, sedentary person who fears positive biblical change and frantically clings to the past, either in his personality growth, in his life decision, or in his manner of living. To resist sanctifying change is to resist and grieve the Holy Spirit. The scriptural doctrine of sanctification necessarily involves growth in holiness. Christians must change in order to become more like Christ. In principle it is true that believers have been declared perfect in Christ, but now they must grow more like Christ in practice. New truths discovered in the study of the Scriptures must become new practices woven into the fabric of one’s daily life.”²¹ You must continually study God’s Word, memorize Scripture and put into practice the principles you have learned, seeking God’s help in these areas. The goal is to develop and practice godly methods of communication to the point where obedience to God’s Word is second nature to you. Then when an opportunity arises to lose control of your temper you automatically obey God without even thinking about it.

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²¹ *Competent to Counsel*, p. 77.