

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION IN MARRIAGE

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In this paper, I shall try to identify what constitutes authentic communication in marriage, what hinders it, how spouses might improve it, and how a church might plan a program to encourage it. I shall not address vertical communication in marriage—i.e., communication with children, with in-laws, or with parents—except as it relates directly to communication between the spouses.

Communication has been defined in terms of its parts: “*Com* means together with” and “*munis* connotes a gift of self, a strengthening or fortifying of the relationship, a binding of oneself with the other person.”²²⁵ This definition indicates that communication requires a mutual sharing of oneself with one's spouse. John W. Drakeford identifies communication as “a chain of events—a step-by-step process.”²²⁶ A more workable definition of marital communication is “a constant exchange of information—of messages—between the two spouses by speech, letter writing, talking on the telephone, the exhibition of bodily or facial expression, and other methods as well.”²²⁷ John C. Howell adds a further quality by defining communication as “the capacity to express the feelings, beliefs, and desires of one person to another through verbal and nonverbal clues which are understood, acknowledged, and responded to by the recipient.”²²⁸ This definition draws out the role of the receiver of the spoken message as important in understanding the meaning of communication. One final definition of communication reveals the negative aspect of the process when it defines communication as “a 'meeting of meanings,' a flow of

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²²⁵Victor Salz, *Between Husbands and Wives* (New York: Paulist Press, 1972), 55.

²²⁶John W. Drakeford, *Do You Hear Me, Honey? The Distortions of Family Communication* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976, 1976), 5. The book is hereafter cited as *Honey*.

²²⁷William J. Lederer and Don D. Jackson, *The Mirages of Marriage* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), 98.

²²⁸John C. Howell, *Growing in Oneness* (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1972), 41-42.

meanings—values, attitudes and understandings—between husband and wife . . . in spite of the many obstacles which would normally block a relationship.”²²⁹ In light of all of these statements, it would appear that authentic communication in marriage may be defined as the process whereby a husband and wife seek to build relationship through use of both verbal and nonverbal messages in an effort to overcome the numerous barriers that hinder successful interaction. The basic purpose of this communication within marriage is to enable the husband and wife to establish the intimacy needed to become one.

The writer has sought to present the various facets of communication in marriage according to the following outline: relationship and communication, other factors relative to communication, characteristics of communication, breakdown of communication, conflict and communication, development of skills in communication, and a conclusion containing recommendations as to how best to implement the implications of the research into a church family life education program.

RELATIONSHIP AND COMMUNICATION

When two people decide to unite their lives in marriage, they enter into a relationship that is fraught with potential danger spots. Victor Salz has discussed this relationship in terms of five fighting stages. There is the courtship stage in which each person fears offending the other. The honeymoon stage is characterized by an increase of emotional pressure because of fear that the marriage will collapse. The seven-year-itch stage of fighting is earmarked by boredom—a drifting of the relationship into monotonous predictability. The void stage of fighting occurs once the children have left the home and only two “strangers” are left in it. The last stage is called “the golden years of glorious fighting” in which there is less involvement in the world and more with each other.²³⁰ Obviously, Salz sees marriage as a relationship characterized by fighting and the need to learn how to fight fairly. Couples have to learn to work out their own rules for getting along if they are to have a semblance of a worthwhile relationship. Spouses must respect each other, be tolerant, put forth maximum effort, and trust each other. Trust can be built only through experiences that are

²²⁹Salz, 229.

²³⁰Ibid., 247-49.

shared and the consistency of interaction. Both spouses come to know what to expect of each other, and a mutual confidence develops as they discover each other to be honest and realistic in their dealings.²³¹

According to William Lederer and Don Jackson in *The Mirages of Marriage*, there are three basic modes of relating. The first mode is symmetrical, i.e., a relationship characterized by both spouses seeking to establish their equality. Hence, it is a status struggle, a competitive relationship. Neither spouse has learned how to cooperate and to relate in an intimate relationship. If the spouses could coherently discuss and divide up the areas of responsibility, they would move from a symmetrical mode of relating to a complementary one. This second mode is one in which both spouses complement each other. This relationship is rarely dominated by one person; rather, one spouse usually dominates in some areas while the other dominates in others. When the spouses cannot agree as to who will take charge in some matter, they may become competitive. When couples alternate occasionally from a complementary to a symmetrical relationship, the relationship is described as a parallel one. The spouses may conflict in different areas, but they feel that they are essentially equal to each other. Therefore, they can be supportive and competitive, honest and open. This third mode of relating is most suitable to an egalitarian society.²³²

The parallel mode of relating requires maturity on the part of both spouses. Such a mature relationship has several characteristics. First, there must be good communication resulting from sharing and listening to each other. The spouses are aware of each other's faults but love and appreciate each other regardless of them. In times of conflict, spouses may reject the other's view, but they do not reject the person. Spouses in such a relationship are able to have a closeness without attempting to manipulate each other. Finally, spouses help each other in specific ways that enhance the relationship.²³³ The more mature the individuals, the better the communication will be between spouses, and the marital relationship will be "only as good as its communication."²³⁴

²³¹Lederer and Jackson, 106-13.

²³²Ibid., 161-70.

²³³John W. Drakeford, *Games Husbands and Wives Play* (Nashville: Broadman, 1970), 27. The book is hereafter cited as *Games*.

²³⁴John Powell, *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?* (Chicago: Argus Communication, 1969), 43-44.

There are some negative aspects of relationship that can affect communication. First, a basic false assumption of the marital relationship is that a spouse assumes he understands what his spouse is thinking or saying.²³⁵ Such an assumption can destroy communication and erode the relationship. Second, a bad compromise can leave one or both spouses unhappy and build up to an explosion.²³⁶ Third, aggressiveness may lead one spouse grudgingly to accept the other's decision, or it may lead to a decision where one was lacking but needed.²³⁷ Fourth, quarrels, although generally having a negative effect, may also lead to a defining of "the extremes of the spouses' relationship" and "place their total behavior in some kind of perspective."²³⁸ Although these aspects may be negative, they are nevertheless a part of the communication process that affects relationship.

OTHER FACTORS RELATIVE TO COMMUNICATION

There are numerous other factors that affect communication. A person has to contend with his own ego if he is to communicate. The ego erects five defenses or "hiding places." The first is reaction formation, or over-compensation for some real or imagined weakness. The second is displacement, or scapegoating, i.e., placing the blame on someone or something else. The third is projection, finding one's own weakness in another. The fourth is introjection, or attributing to oneself the good qualities of another. The last defense is rationalization, or self-justification.²³⁹ These ego defenses seek to keep the individual from having to confront or be confronted by threatening events or ideas in the marital relationship.

Emotions also play a major role in communication. Emotions may be positive or negative. Healthy emotions reveal what one considers to be valuable in a relationship. Emotions should be acknowledged, admitted to self, investigated as to cause, reported to the other spouse, and investigated as to rightness or wrongness.²⁴⁰ Emotions will become

²³⁵Drakeford, *Honey*, 122.

²³⁶Paul A. Hauck and Edmund S Kean, *Marriage and the Memo Method* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 82-83.

²³⁷Lederer and Jackson, 268.

²³⁸*Ibid.*, 269.

²³⁹Powell, 103-16.

²⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 90-92.

unhealthy if ignored or denied, if the person seeks to rebut incoming messages rather than investigate feelings, or if blame is indiscriminately given because of anger.²⁴¹ The unhealthiness is primarily a result of the fact that emotions that are denied do not require the adjustment or integration of emotions and the resulting growth. Whether emotions are healthy or unhealthy, a spouse has an “Emotional Early-Warning System” that may be “triggered” by a flag word that closes off hearing the remainder of the message. Each spouse must work to overcome this communication killer, and (s)he can do so by distrusting, ignoring, and forgetting the irritation produced by the flag word and fight off the urge to respond hastily in order to evaluate the positive aspects of what the other spouse is saying.²⁴² To ward off one's angry feelings that are stirred in the communication process, a spouse must recognize his/her anger, discover the cause, refuse to be a martyr, work out the anger (through physical activity, if necessary), not hold a grudge, attempt to take positive steps to alleviate the causes of that anger, and be certain to communicate clearly so as not to provoke anger in response.²⁴³ Although it is important that spouses share their feelings, their emotions, with each other, it would seem that “talking about one's feelings' does not necessarily refer to spilling out everything for the average couple, *selective disclosure* of feelings seems more beneficial to marital harmony than indiscriminate catharsis.”²⁴⁴ The amount and type of disclosure depends upon timing and circumstance.

Perhaps no better known problem area related to communication is sex. Gary Kelly had the following to say about sex and communication:

It is important to remember, however, that most sexual problems cannot be worked out apart from the basic problems in the overall relationship. Part of working on these problems is that *good communication* I keep emphasizing. If one partner is feeling used, dissatisfied, or unhappy about sex or any other aspect of the relationship, but does not share the feeling with the other, things will probably not improve. *Compromise* is necessary in sex too. It is seldom that both partners are exactly alike in their sexual needs and preferences. In other words, your partner may not be interested in sex at the same time you are or may not enjoy the same kinds of sexual activity as you. Therefore,

²⁴¹Ibid., 91-93.

²⁴²Drakeford, *Honey*, 137-38.

²⁴³Ibid., 140-41.

²⁴⁴Arthur F. Kline and Morris L. Medley, eds., *Dating and Marriage: An Interactionist Perspective* (Boston: Holbrook Press, 1973), 275.

there will have to be compromises in both directions to develop a successful sexual relationship.²⁴⁵

If troubles arise in the area of sex, there is a tendency for each partner to blame the other without even discussing the matter.²⁴⁶ However, if the spouses would only discuss the disturbing and pleasurable aspects of sex, they would likely find that such communication leads to a workable solution. Spouses might find that reading reputable books on sex may help dispel any misconceptions they may have as to what is “normal,” as well as offset the words of some braggart.²⁴⁷ Lederer and Jackson state that “the pronouncements of most sex consultants, books, and articles” propagate the view that “sex is the keystone of marital success.” However, they strongly disagree by arguing, “Sex is significant; and good sex is satisfying and emotionally nourishing. Sex is highly desirable, but it is not the only vital force in marriage, either during the honeymoon or later.”²⁴⁸ It would appear that sex is important but that only the couple can determine what is “normal” for them. Thus, there is a need for communication in the matter of sex in the marital relationship.

Another matter that affects communication is religious affiliation, belief, and commitment. Religious differences are especially important in marriages in which persons come from different religious backgrounds. A successful relationship is possible but only if the couple honestly faces potential problems—problems that become critical when children are born. The three major problems have to do with how the spouses will affiliate (with one spouse's religion or with a compromise church), how the children will affiliate, and the impact of religious differences (in terms of commitment level).²⁴⁹ The real issue of a mixed marriage comes down to one central problem: Both spouses come from a different cultural background in which each sees self (and his/her religious group) as better than the other.²⁵⁰ The key to a successful marriage for such persons is an “intellectual-emotional

²⁴⁵Gary F. Kelly, *Learning about Sex: The Contemporary Guide for Young Adults*, rev. ed. (Woodbury, NY: Barron's Education Series, 1977), 132.

²⁴⁶Herman A. Lantz and Eloise C. Snyder, *Marriage: An Examination of the Man-Woman Relationship* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1962), 206.

²⁴⁷Howell, 83.

²⁴⁸Lederer and Jackson, 120.

²⁴⁹Lantz and Snyder, 173-77.

²⁵⁰Ibid., 162.

commitment . . . based not only on the desire to accept differences but also on the ability to follow through emotionally and behave in accordance with the desire.”²⁵¹ A valid faith can assist in this process because it “encourages growth in selfhood,” “enhances intimacy,” and “develops trust through love.”²⁵² If a healthy faith aids understanding and communication in this type of marriage, how much more it should assist in a home united by a common faith and heritage.

Child-rearing is also an area that affects communication. When spouses have differences of opinion as to how to rear children, they need to think the problem through, write it down, discuss it, read books related to it, and—if all else fails—get professional help.²⁵³ If both spouses cooperate with each other and support each other in rearing children, they will present a united front, as well as enhance their personal communication.

Relating to one's parents and in-laws can also be a hazard to communication between spouses. It is important that both partners realize that their relationship takes precedence over that with their parents and that communication with parents should never include negative information about the partner since it should be taken up with the spouse.²⁵⁴

Dennis Rainey claims that poor communication is not the major problem of marriage as most married people think. Rather, it is merely “a symptom of a deeper problem—isolation” and can only improve once a person breaks out of the “boredom and apathy” that has monopolized the marriage relationship, something that can only be done with the help of others in counseling, at a marriage retreat, or in small groups.²⁵⁵ The claim may be an example of hyperbole, but there is truth in the idea that help may be needed if a couple is to overcome their communication problems.

No doubt there are many other problem areas that relate to communication, but those that have been presented are the most obvious ones. Communication improves in direct relationship to the

²⁵¹Ibid., 183.

²⁵²Howell, 60-61.

²⁵³Hauck and Kean, 76.

²⁵⁴Drakeford, *Games*, 80-81.

²⁵⁵Dennis Rainey, “Teaching Couples to Communicate: The Problem of Ruts,” in *The Christian Educator's Handbook on Family Life Education: A Complete Resource on Family Life Issues in the Local Church*, ed. Kenneth O. Gangel and James C. Wilhoit, 97-105 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 99.

satisfactory resolution of these several areas. The problem is that such a resolution requires communication—good communication.

CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD COMMUNICATION

As couples relate to each other through various experiences, they begin to see each other as more predictable in response. They actually become set in their ways of interacting until they come to believe what has been labeled the “survival myth,” i.e., “the illusion shared by family members that they have to maintain their existing familiar ways of relating in order to survive psychologically.”²⁵⁶ This feeling makes changing old patterns of communication very difficult.

There are five patterns of communication. The first is placating—the denial of one's own right to an opinion. The second is blaming—in which one is critical and domineering. The third pattern is super-reasonable—the use of dispassionate, cool logic in discussion. The fourth is irrelevant—in which one spouse ignores or tunes out the other. The last pattern is congruent—in which words and feelings match the context in a realistic way.²⁵⁷ This latter pattern is the one toward which all couples ought to aspire.

There are five levels of communication—levels reflecting the “degrees of willingness to go outside” oneself in the communication process. From lowest to highest, they are cliché conversation, reporting the facts about others, expressing one's own ideas and judgments, expressing one's own feelings or emotions (“gut-level” communication), and peak communication (“based on absolute openness and honesty”).²⁵⁸ As couples mature in their communication, they progress toward this latter level. There are five rules for this mature communication that is characterized by openness and honesty: “Never imply a judgment on the other”; emotions are neutral—neither good nor bad; “feelings (emotions) must be integrated with the intellect and will”; “emotions must be 'reported'”; and emotions should be reported when experienced.²⁵⁹ If these rules are followed, they should lead to

²⁵⁶Shirley Gehrke Luthman and Martin Kirschenbaum, *The Dynamic Family* (Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behavior Books, 1974), 167.

²⁵⁷Robert D. Dale and Carrie Dale, *Making Good Marriages Better* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1978), 65-69.

²⁵⁸Powell, 50-62.

²⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 65-78.

“mature” and “authentic relationship.”²⁶⁰ This type of communication seeks to establish a mutually acceptable relationship. Whatever is accepted by the spouses becomes an unwritten set of ground rules—no matter how bizarre—and, if violated, a hassle erupts until another mutually accepted pattern is arrived at.²⁶¹ To arrive at a healthy pattern, both spouses acknowledge their differences and willingly give a little to the mutual benefit of each so that both might win in the relationship. This process may take at least six to eight weeks before any great degree of success might be attained.²⁶² Feedback involves the process whereby a message is sent, the message is received, the message is checked out by the receiver as to content, the feedback is confirmed by the sender, the receiver expresses his emotional reaction to the message, and the sender hears and reflects the feelings of the receiver.²⁶³ Leveling involves telling one's feelings and thoughts clearly and simply by the following process: talking in terms of what action causes the irritation, talking in terms of one's feelings in response to the spouse's action, singling out one important complaint and stating it, and sticking to one issue at a time. Leveling specifies the action, the situation, and the feeling.²⁶⁴

Although communication must be verbalized, it is primarily nonverbal in nature. According to one study, communication is fifty-five percent facial, thirty-eight percent vocal, and only seven percent verbal.²⁶⁵ If this study is reliable, it reveals that over ninety percent of communication is nonverbal. Therefore, what one says may not be nearly as important as how he says it or who or what he really is. Furthermore, “intimate relationships are nourished and sustained nonverbally,” and long verbal statements of love can never offset the lack of nonverbal assurances.²⁶⁶ Body language is a type of nonverbal communication but is highly individual in meaning and interpretation and is subject to misinterpretation even by experts.²⁶⁷ Symbolic language is also nonverbal and involves the giving of gifts on

²⁶⁰Ibid., 79.

²⁶¹Lederer and Jackson, 178-181.

²⁶²Ibid., 286-87.

²⁶³Dale and Dale, 76-77.

²⁶⁴John Gottman, Cliff Notarius, Jonni Gonso, and Howard Markham, *A Couple's Guide to Communication* (Champaign, IL: Research Press, 1976), 36-38.

²⁶⁵Drakeford, *Honey*, 52.

²⁶⁶Dale and Dale, 69-70.

²⁶⁷Drakeford, *Honey*, 58.

significant occasions.²⁶⁸ Nonverbal communication may replace verbal communication when no words are spoken but nonverbal action reveals the answer or response to a comment, it may reinforce verbal communication when in agreement with the verbal, or it may contradict the verbal. There are ten ways to communicate nonverbally: proxemics (or distance), facial expression, paralanguage (manner of communication), eye contact, personal attire, hand gestures, body position, posture, and head movement.²⁶⁹ Kenneth O. Gangel and Samuel Canine indicate that the most commonly used forms of nonverbal communication are facial expressions and hand gestures, with facial gestures being the most accurate form of communication.²⁷⁰ They offer some principles concerning how to evaluate nonverbal communication: First, if there is contradiction between verbal and nonverbal communication, it will typically lead to the rejection of what has been said. Second, nonverbal communication “must be interpreted in light of verbal communication.” Third, nonverbal communication reflects communication of “a feeling, an attitude, or the relationship level.”²⁷¹ Because these nonverbal forms of communication are subject to interpretation—and, hence, misinterpretation, spouses need to improve this form of communication by reinforcement through verbal means. With the passing of time, and through consistent use of nonverbal communication, spouses will learn to interpret them properly.

Another means whereby communication takes place is the use of the memo method. This method involves writing down one's complaint after thinking it through carefully and objectively in the spouse's absence. This written message may have a stronger impact than a spoken one because of its precision. The memo method involves stating the problem clearly and precisely, listing all of the reasons or causes for the spouse's actions, stating proposed solutions to the problem, and giving the memo to the other spouse. The other spouse studies the memo and follows the same procedure in writing out a reply. Then, the two meet for a conference. If there is no resolution to the problem, new memos are composed in light of the new material discovered while in

²⁶⁸Ibid., 50.

²⁶⁹Kenneth O. Gangel and Samuel Canine, *Communication and Conflict in Churches and Christian Organizations* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 87-93.

²⁷⁰Ibid., 88, 92.

²⁷¹Ibid., 94.

conference. These memos are also kept for possible future referral.²⁷² Although this memo method has merit because of its emphasis upon precision and its goal of producing a level-headed approach to problems, it would appear to be limited by its slow-moving pace and its demand for a record-storage system. However, a more recent approach to this older idea would be to use the e-mail system with its simple form of communication and its easy storage of such information for future referral. One major weakness of this system is that nonverbal communication is not present in printed messages, making the printed word subject to misinterpretation. Hence, such communication demands careful selection of words. Even then, there is the danger of the receiver of the message misunderstanding the meaning of the word selected by the sender. Such breakdown of communication is an ever-present possibility.

BREAKDOWN OF COMMUNICATION

Lederer and Jackson state, "The greatest single cause of breakdown is the exchange of information which is culturally clear to one spouse and culturally foreign to the other."²⁷³ This can be an even greater burden when spouses come from different parts of the world. On the other hand, two persons may come from different parts of the world and still have more similar cultural perceptions than persons from the same country who have different religious backgrounds—e.g., Mormons and Presbyterians. These cultural backgrounds may radically affect how each spouse looks at marriage and responsibility. Two omissions may lead to a breakdown in communication: (1) the failure to define responsibilities for each spouse, and (2) the failure to interpret differences as merely differences instead of as signs of inferiority-superiority.²⁷⁴ Such differences of background and innate ability may lead to hostile feelings; but, because of fear, a spouse may not communicate this hostility. The spouse may be afraid for three reasons: a fear of upsetting the loved one, a fear of being rejected by the other, or a fear of being unable to bear the rejection because of a need for the other's love.²⁷⁵ The fear of losing one's spouse shuts off communication,

²⁷²Hauck and Kean, 12-17.

²⁷³Lederer and Jackson, 103.

²⁷⁴Ibid., 247-52.

²⁷⁵Hauck and Kean, 22.

whereas, in truth, the lack of communication is more likely to cause a breakdown in the relationship.

Even if spouses should attempt to communicate in spite of their fears, they have to face the possibility of a breakdown in communication at three levels: the report level (the basic content of the message), the command level (the tone and other nonverbal aspects), and the context level (“the meanings that are a part of the setting”).²⁷⁶ Drakeford delineates thirteen problem areas at seven different distortion points, or sensitive spots where communication is likely to break down. These seven points are at the transmitter's brain, the movement of the message from the brain to the transmitting organ, the expression of the message, the channel of transmission, the receiver's receptor organs, the movement of the message from the receptor organ to the receiver's brain, and the receiver's brain.²⁷⁷ The large number of ways in which a communication can break down is staggering. A representative list of the many barriers to communication will further illustrate the problem: divergent interests, inadequate time, hostile feelings, fear, pre-judgments, not listening, destructive criticism, fuzzy thinking, language (jargon), nagging, sulking, bypassing, gunny-sacking. Victor Salz points out the obvious when he writes, “It is much easier to throw up barriers than to overcome them”²⁷⁸ Charles Sell adds some additional barriers: “differences between men and women and how they think and how they perceive things,” “pride that makes them feel the other person is not worth understanding,” “being afraid to really understand because it will hurt them or because they may have to do something about it,” and “self-centeredness.”²⁷⁹ All of these barriers effectively impede communication. To further illustrate how people throw up barriers to authentic communication, John Powell offers a catalogue of thirty-seven games and roles that people play in order to keep from revealing themselves—e.g., the braggart, the crank, the flirt, the loner, the poor mouth, the worrier.²⁸⁰ Many spouses, too, would rather play roles than attempt the difficult task of communicating.

²⁷⁶Dale and Dale, 64-65.

²⁷⁷Drakeford, *Honey*, vii, 6, 10.

²⁷⁸Salz, 38.

²⁷⁹Charles M. Sell, *Family Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 230.

²⁸⁰Powell, 121-67.

As if role-playing were not bad enough, Lederer and Jackson describe eight different ways to “drive your spouse crazy.” The first way is the “incomplete transaction,” i.e., no decision is made but is rather sidestepped. The remedy is rudeness or bluntness in forcing the issue to a decision. The second technique for driving a spouse crazy is based on the statement, “Thank you for nothing, Darling.” The remedy is to initiate change that will break the old pattern of offering a poor substitute for what is really needed. The third technique is the “mind-reading act.” The remedy is always to agree—even to the point of over-agreeing. The fourth technique is the “handy heart” and the “convenient cancer”—the excuse offered when the spouse wishes to avoid something. The remedy is to make an appointment with the doctor and require the spouse to live according to the doctor's diagnosis. The fifth technique is the “pseudobenevolent dictatorship.” The remedy is politely to refuse the unwanted gift or suggestion and suggest an alternate course of action. The sixth technique is reflected in the statement, “I could be the best husband (wife) in the world, if only my spouse would be different.” The remedy is to ask the spouse to follow the statement to its illogical end for both partner and self. The seventh technique is the “disaster seeker.” The remedy is to take immediate action against the spouse by either physical departure if (s)he does not admit to having the problem, or by asking for detailed descriptions of the coming disaster. The final technique for driving one's spouse crazy is the “cross complainer.” The remedy is to not allow the spouse to bring up a complaint in response to a complaint but rather consider the complaint on its own merit (or demerit).²⁸¹ It is readily apparent that the use of these eight techniques would produce a breakdown in authentic communication.

The breakdown of communication in the marriage relationship can occur from external or internal causes and by chance or design. Such a breakdown can quickly lead to conflict.

CONFLICT IN COMMUNICATION

The inner dynamics of conflict have to do with the verbal sparring that takes place within marriage—the function of which is “to see what the opponent is like, what the points of vulnerability and sensitivity are,

²⁸¹Lederer and Jackson, 213-44.

what kinds of statements bring what types of reactions.”²⁸² There are five levels of marital conflict: (1) concealed conflict—in which feelings are “kept under wraps”; (2) overt conflict—out in the open with no attempt to deny the problem; (3) chronic conflict—difficulties become recurrent because unresolved; (4) progressive conflict—continued deterioration with new problems added to old ones; and (5) habitual conflict—in which the couple no longer can or will agree and a high degree of tension results in damage to mental health.²⁸³ These five levels of conflict reveal the depth of the struggles faced in marriage.

There are several hindrances to resolving conflict—e.g., not admitting that a problem exists, the lack of communication, dealing with the symptoms of the problem rather than the causes, avoiding responsibility for the problem, over-intellectualization.²⁸⁴ Although spouses may admit that conflict in communication has become a problem, yet the spouse may make poor responses in attempting to handle it. For example, a spouse may withdraw from the problem or the other spouse, (s)he may pout or sulk or turn to sarcasm, (s)he may react out of excessive anger and even seek revenge, or (s)he may substitute—i.e., seek to compensate by finding release outside of the marriage in excessive drinking, extramarital sex, or some similar activity.²⁸⁵

There are three ways to settle conflict: win-lose (one dominates); lose-lose (bad compromises); and win-win (a quiet discussion in which there is sharing of feelings and ideas).²⁸⁶ If spouses wish to achieve a win-win settlement to conflict, they should find the following guidelines useful: 1. “Focus on the problem at hand when arguing.” 2. “Seek to clarify causes of dissatisfaction which underlie behavioral symptoms of stress.” 3. “Be willing to personally change behavior which antagonizes one's mate.” 4. “Intensify areas of satisfaction in the marriage.” 5. “Rely on the resources of your Christian faith.” 6. “Seek counseling help if necessary.”²⁸⁷ The final guideline realistically indicates that outside help may be needed to resolve the conflict. Unfortunately, seeking professional guidance does not guarantee a

²⁸²Lantz and Snyder, 278.

²⁸³Ibid., 277-78.

²⁸⁴Ibid.

²⁸⁵Howell, 115-17.

²⁸⁶Dale and Dale, 104.

²⁸⁷Howell, 118-23.

satisfactory resolution of the problem, for “when every available resource for reconciliation has been ineffective in healing a broken marriage, couples have to face the question of whether to continue to live together in unhappiness or end the marriage through separation or divorce.”²⁸⁸ Spouses need to be aware that verbal sparring may result in a sudden knock-out blow; but, more typically, the knock-out may result from an accumulation of damage done by numerous jabs. Marriages seldom die from a single blow; rather, they die from a succession of blows over a period of time.

Marriages can be battlegrounds or war zones where conflict occurs on a regular basis. Couples that do not have an effective communication system will discover that, since there is no way to resolve problematic issues, they begin to accumulate. Typically, the wife wants to talk about matters with the husband, but he is unwilling to do so because he thinks conversation will not solve anything or will only make matters worse. Newman and Newman describe these “dissatisfied couples” as persons that avoid communication because what communication they do have is often negative and intensifies with each negative response.²⁸⁹ On the other hand, “harmonious, satisfied couples” are willing “to listen to and consider each other’s problems,” and to “validate each other’s concerns by expressing understanding, even if they cannot offer solutions.”²⁹⁰ There is a great need for empowering God’s people to move from the dissatisfied group to the harmonious, satisfied group in their marriages. Thus, there is need to improve skills in communication.

IMPROVING SKILLS IN COMMUNICATION

If there is to be a chance for successful communication in marriage, both spouses must genuinely wish to communicate. However, even the very desire and effort to communicate do not necessarily result in the resolution of marital problems. Desire and effort are, nevertheless, the right starting points. Two other essentials for good communication to be possible are the acceptance of each other as responsible persons and

²⁸⁸Ibid., 123.

²⁸⁹Barbara M. Newman and Philip R. Newman, *Development through Life: A Psychosocial Approach*, 7th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999), 442.

²⁹⁰Ibid.

display of the emotional supports of love, empathy, and trust.²⁹¹ The first step to improving communication is the development of a “functional communications pattern” based on statement of a message, acknowledgment by the receiver, giving information that the message has been heard and understood, and acknowledgment of the acknowledgment.²⁹² A spouse must be sure the other spouse has received and properly understood the message sent. Feedback is essential. Three characteristics of good communication are dialogue (as opposed to monologue), discussion (rather than debate), and listening (not just talking).²⁹³ Good communication requires that spouses first identify and deal with any “difficulties they have in understanding each other,” then admit and overcome any “bad listening habits,” and learn “good listening responses.”²⁹⁴ Communication will be unsuccessful if spouses do not make improvement in these three areas. If a spouse is unwilling to overcome areas of deficiency, (s)he will be unable to learn how to listen and how to respond.

John C. Howell indicates that there are ten commandments for effective communication: 1. “Be willing to recognize the need for improvement.” 2. “Plan for time together.” 3. “Respect the self-esteem of the mate.” 4. “Learn to listen intensively.” 5. “Dare to risk openness.” 6. “Be sure that the message heard is the message sent.” 7. “Try to clarify nonverbal signals.” 8. “Deal with issues at hand when in conflict.” 9. “Use communication aids.” 10. “Avoid typical communication errors.”²⁹⁵ These ten commandments, if followed religiously, will improve communication.

A plan for improving communication should include the following ideas: Be certain to understand the most likely areas for breakdown in communication, study the family communication patterns, analyze personal communication behavior, improve skills in communication, and practice with the family.²⁹⁶ Such a plan should also include settling on a specific time; a specific place—free of all interruptions; a specific pattern—if a “sensitive issue, ten minutes for her, ten minutes for him,

²⁹¹Howell, 42.

²⁹²Lederer and Jackson, 277.

²⁹³Howell, 44-46.

²⁹⁴Sell, 230-31.

²⁹⁵Howell, 53-56.

²⁹⁶Drakeford, *Honey*, 7-8.

and the remainder for exchange; and a specific prohibition—no interrupting, no exploding, no sulking.”²⁹⁷

Marital communication ought to be graced by politeness. There ought to be no temper tantrums, no explosions! Controversial issues should be discussed only when both spouses are seated and facing each other. Spouses ought not to interrupt each other, and they ought to admit it when they are wrong. They ought to begin discussions in a polite, friendly way and limit the discussion to only one issue at a time. Spouses must attempt to see each other's point of view. They should offer as many positive suggestions as they can and not put themselves down. They should accept the other person's suggestions and consider their viability.²⁹⁸ If common courtesy is extended to a friend or even a stranger, how much more it ought to be extended to a spouse. The result of such an obvious suggestion would be startling for some couples. Of course, the Bible has much to say about the kind of attitude that ought to be expressed in a relationship of love. Paul is very definitive in his discussion of what genuine love is to be like in First Corinthians 13:4-8: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. . . . It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails” (NIV).

The value of feedback to communication should be readily apparent. Sell calls this “paraphrasing,” or “reflective listening,” in which the spouse repeats what (s)he has heard.²⁹⁹ It helps couples to clarify the informational and emotional levels of their communication, it helps the couples to listen better, it requires a slow-down in the communication process and thereby takes some of the heat out of the conflict, it will work even if only one spouse is committed to using it, and it stresses the importance of the feelings of one's spouse.³⁰⁰

The use of family meetings should encourage the development of authentic communication in marriage. The family meeting should have three phases: (1) “Gripe Time”—for stating a complaint clearly and specifically, for constructive leveling, and for listening to the spouse's

²⁹⁷Drakeford, *Games*, 95.

²⁹⁸Gottman and others, 128-29. For a similar “Communication Contract” for husbands and wives, see Gangel and Canine, 32.

²⁹⁹Sell, 231.

³⁰⁰Dale and Dale, 78-79.

response; (2) “Agenda Building”—the choosing of one or two complaints to consider in detail; and (3) “Problem Solving”—the offering of specific, positive suggestions for a remedy for the complaints.³⁰¹ There are certain steps that might be followed in presenting a problem area. A spouse should first pray for God's wisdom and the leadership of the Holy Spirit. (S)He should then plan a time with the spouse for discussing the matter truthfully but kindly. (S)He should not lose his/her temper nor defend self, but (s)he should allow time for the spouse to respond. Once the matter has been discussed openly, it should be committed to God.³⁰² To bring the matter up again and again would be a form of nagging and, hence, self-defeating.

Good communication requires openness but not repetitiveness. Openness is not complaining, not blaming others, not talking about the problems of other people, and not boasting. Rather, openness involves talking about personal weaknesses and takes place with individuals who are significant persons in one's life—hopefully, one's spouse.³⁰³

Giving and receiving criticism is vital to growth as an individual and to growth in the skill of communicating. In offering criticism, a spouse should first “sugar-coat” it, then discuss his own failure, give the partner an opportunity “to save face,” and “issue a courteous challenge” when there is no other alternative.³⁰⁴ In receiving criticism, a person should sit quietly and listen while looking directly at the person criticizing; and (s)he should not get defensive and find fault with the speaker, act as though mortally wounded, jest, caricature the complaint, or change the subject. Rather, the person should indicate that (s)he understands the other person's objection and will seriously consider it.³⁰⁵ The value of criticism is that it makes the individual take a closer look at self, and such examination will frequently lead to growth.

As spouses seek to establish or re-establish authentic communication in their marriage, they may need to consider discussing the following positive areas: their backgrounds, feelings, desires and wishes, views of love, ideas about sexuality, affirmation given and received, what they have become as a couple, the level of trust and its

³⁰¹Gottman and others, 62-65.

³⁰²Tim LaHaye, *How to Be Happy Though Married* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1968), 121-22.

³⁰³Drakeford, *Games*, 74.

³⁰⁴Drakeford, *Honey*, 86-90.

³⁰⁵*Ibid.*, 144.

development, intimacy and how to enhance it, any negative feelings, expressions of emotions, conflict assessment, planning for the future, sharing differences, evaluating communication, and spiritual progress.³⁰⁶ Then, they must not forget the following truth:

Getting the marital process back in balance often can be a long and arduous task. Even with professional help it may require a year or more. In some cases, however, spouses working on their own may be successful in only six to eight weeks, or perhaps a few months, provided both have a keen desire to solve their mutual problem.³⁰⁷

Good communication is possible, but it requires hard work and sacrifice on the part of both spouses. Patience and perseverance will also be needed to allow time for change to occur.

APPLICATION TO FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION

What follows is an effort to incorporate the preceding research findings into a marriage retreat setting.

Promotion and Selection of Participants

The promotion of the retreat shall be by word of mouth, and selection of participants shall involve approval of brief applications submitted to a committee of three persons. Participants should be married couples between specified age ranges for similarity of needs and problems faced. The married couples must not be having serious marital difficulties. The participants should be limited to a maximum of ten couples. There should be some kind of an application form to get relevant information about each couple and to help assess the level of commitment. The retreat program offered here is for Friday night and Saturday. The day, time, and length may be adjusted to fit a particular church situation. Although such a retreat could take place at the local church, it would be better to meet away from usual surroundings and where distractions will be minimal. Retreat leaders should be a married couple with counseling skills.

Preparation for the Retreat

Preparation for the retreat should include attendance at the three Sunday morning services prior to the retreat. During these services, the

³⁰⁶Sell, 243-51.

³⁰⁷Lederer and Jackson, 287.

pastor should preach sermons emphasizing some aspect of marriage and the home. Three possible sermon suggestions are “Caring Is Sharing,” emphasizing the principle that love is exemplified by action; “Found Faithful,” emphasizing the importance of faithfulness in the physical, mental, and emotional realms plus faithfulness in the mundane things from day to day; and “Taming the Tiger,” emphasizing the need to be in control of one's emotions.

Other preparations for the retreat should include a requirement that each participant must read one of a list of several books on communication in marriage. These books should be available in the church library or easily obtainable at a Christian bookstore. If there may be difficulty in finding such books, the church should purchase a couple of copies of the following books, or others deemed appropriate: *Building a Better Marriage*, by Reuben Herring; *Caring Enough to Confront*, by David Augsburger; *Circle of Love: Dynamics of Family Happiness*, edited by Joseph Hinkle; *Do You Hear Me, Honey?* by John W. Drakeford; *Games Husbands and Wives Play*, by John W. Drakeford; *The Gift of Sex: A Christian Guide to Sexual Fulfillment*, by Joyce and Clifford Penner; *Growing in Oneness*, by John C. Howell; *Hidden Keys of a Loving, Lasting Marriage*, by Gary Smalley; *How to Change Your Spouse (Without Ruining Your Marriage)*, by Norman H. Wright and Gary J. Oliver; *How to Have a Happy Marriage*, by David and Vera Mace; *Husbands and Wives*, edited by Howard Hendricks; *The Religiously Mixed Marriage*, by Gary and Donna Beauchamp; *Making Good Marriages Better*, by Robert and Carrie Dale; *What Wives Wish Their Husbands Knew about Women*, by James Dobson; and *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?* by John Powell.

After the Retreat

When the retreat is over, there must be some kind of follow-up meeting(s) so that each couple will be accountable for applying what they have learned. If there is no accountability, most couples will settle back into their typical relationship once they return home. Small group meetings can be held in the various participants' homes over the next few months with the express purpose of encouraging evaluation so that growth may occur in the lives of each couple. Of course, there must be an environment of “friendly accountability,” not one that is judgmental

or embarrassing.³⁰⁸ These follow-up meetings may lead to the development of a prayer group that offers fellowship and encouragement on a continuing basis. This result should be spontaneous on the part of the group, however, and not the suggestion/demand of the group leader.

A RETREAT PROGRAM SCHEDULE

FRIDAY EVENING

- 7:00 Devotion on the barriers to communication with God with application for communication in the marriage (Texts: Sin—Psalm 66:18; Indifference—Proverbs 1:28; Stubbornness—Zechariah 7:13; Right Relationships—1 Peter 3:7)
- 7:15 Hand out form with incomplete sentences to be filled out by each participant (See Form I)
- 7:30 Ladies, Speak Out (Spouses are paired off; the wife presents her answers to her husband; they discuss them.)
- 8:30 Break
- 8:45 Men, Speak Out (Spouses are paired off; the husband presents his answers to his wife; they discuss them.)
- 9:45 Clear the Air (Group time: A time of possible sharing—if both spouses agree to sharing an item of interest, or surprise)
- 10:00 Concluding Prayer

SATURDAY MORNING

- 6:00 Guided Prayer Time
- 7:00 Breakfast
- 8:00 Devotion emphasizing verbal and nonverbal communication (Text: Malachi 1:13-14)
- 8:15 Group Discussion (of nonverbal communication)
- 8:45 Individual Couples (discussion of their own individual nonverbal patterns—both negative and positive)
- 9:15 Disagreement Time (Spouses will choose and discuss one of three subjects which will be presented at that time—one spouse will be for, the other against.)
- Both are to pay particular attention to the verbal and nonverbal levels of communication. The subjects might be something like

³⁰⁸See Rainey, 102-3.

buying a new product, corporal punishment, where to spend a holiday—at home, with parents, a trip somewhere.)

10:00 Break

10:30 Demonstration (It is anticipated that the retreat leaders will be a husband and wife team who can demonstrate the giving and receiving of feedback: sending a message, receiver verifying the information, acknowledgment of accuracy or inaccuracy, the impact of the message upon the feelings of the receiver, and acknowledgment of those feelings by the sender.)

11:00 Feedback Practice (Spouses paired off to go through the feedback process at least two times each as sender and receiver. The subjects may be like the following: the assignment of household duties, men's/women's night out, initiating sexual overtures.)

12:00 Clear the Air (See Friday, 9:45)

12:15 Lunch

SATURDAY AFTERNOON

1:00 Free Time (Spouses spend the afternoon together doing whatever they choose.)

SATURDAY EVENING

5:30 Dinner

6:30 Devotion concerning the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah, with emphasis upon their need for a conference to discuss their family problems (Text: Genesis 27:6-10, 15-23)

6:45 "State of the Union" (Spouses pair off and consider the condition of their marriage. (See Form II)

7:45 Break

8:00 Group Share Time (Spouses share discoveries and commitments, if any.)

8:45 Clear the Air (Appropriate comments and encouragement are given by the retreat leaders.)

9:00 Closing Prayer (Spouses pair off and sit facing each other with knees touching. They take turns praying aloud for each other.)

SUNDAY MORNING

6:00 Guided Prayer Time

7:00 Breakfast

8:00 Devotion emphasizing love and relationship in marriage (Text: 1 Corinthians 13)

9:00 Pack and prepare for departure

10:00 Worship Service

11:00 Benediction and Departure

FORM I
AN INVENTORY OF LIKES AND DISLIKES

I've been wanting to tell you that _____

You make me the most angry when _____

I don't mind you getting angry; but, when you get angry, I don't like it when you _____

You embarrass me when _____

I need you the most when _____ because that's when I need you to _____

You bring me the most joy when _____

I feel most romantic when _____

When I married you, I thought the best thing about you was _____

Now, I think the best thing about you is _____

The one thing I wish we could do over again is _____

FORM II
"STATE OF THE UNION"

Ground Rules:

No bringing up old wounds
No insulting comments
No accusations or blaming
No interrupting
No threats

Things to Consider:

What the past has been like
What the present is like
The biggest problem
The biggest blessing
What the future can be like
Goals
Hopes
Dreams
Strategies for attaining

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