



# *Celebration of Love*

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# Preface

Our sons once bore the sad news home from school that the mom of one of their little classmates had left town, leaving him and his daddy behind. She had said she didn't want to be a mother or a wife anymore. She never came back. For those of us looking on, it was all so sudden, so unexpected, so antithetical to the picture-perfect family we thought we knew. The jolt shook the community of faith as well as the neighborhood.

What goes so wrong that families sometimes scatter in fragments, like shards of rubber strewn on a highway when tread separates from a truck tire? Is there any hope that families so badly shattered can be restored, or is the children's rhyme about Humpty Dumpty true of families too: "All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again"?

Jesus didn't think so. His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane captures His desire for all people, perhaps especially for such families: "I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them" (John 17: 26).

If we were to sum up the teaching of Jesus in a word, it would be *love*. Jesus helped us see that love—for God and our neighbors (the people closest to us)—is at the heart of God's commandments (Matt. 22:37-40). At least a dozen times throughout the New Testament the refrain of His teaching echoes, "Love one another" (cf. John 13:34; 15:12, 17; Rom. 13:8; 1 Thess. 4:9; 1 Pet. 1:22; 1 John 3:11 and several other places in 1 and 2 John).

Love in human relationships is so crucial, yet so often it is in scarce supply. A couple was once referred to us for marriage counseling. They came, as if driven by duty, but we observed an astounding absence of warmth and caring between them. It seemed like they had emotional hypothermia. Their marriage was shivering. Their extremities were cold and the core temperature was steadily dropping. A personality test we gave them showed that indeed the qualities of caring and sympathy for each other were absent. They both scored in the "indifferent" range. Despite our efforts to massage warmth and love into their relationship, a malaise of callous coldness and insensitivity filled the void where kindness, understanding and love should have been. Eventually, they broke off from counseling. We later learned that they had divorced.

Indifference, not hatred, is the true opposite of love. Strange as it may seem, the presence of hatred in a relationship yields a more hopeful prognosis for growth than a diagnosis of indifference. Indifference indicates that the relationship is running on empty. Something crucial to vitality in the relationship is absent. Jesus identified the problem in human experience and noted the missing ingredient: "You do not have the love of God in your hearts" (John 5:42).

This insight of Jesus is profound, but it often runs counter to our typical thinking about what is wrong in human nature and how it must be fixed. Many hold the view that the problem is the presence of sin and selfishness in human hearts which must be expelled if people and their

relationships are to flourish. But while it is true that sin has filled human hearts with selfishness, there is another truth that Jesus helps us to grasp—the sin-sick heart is empty, drained of love. The connection with the God who is Love is broken. As much as the heart needs to be emptied of selfishness, it needs to be filled with the love of God.

While in certain cases, Jesus expelled demons from human lives, His more common approach was that of showing the compassion and warmth of the love of God to people. Love flowed from His heart through His eyes as He looked at them, through His hands as He touched them, through His arms as He embraced them, and through His voice as He spoke with them. In His earthly life He was the embodiment of Love walking around in our midst.

Jesus' love toward people proved to be a most powerful change agent. It rescued the fickle Peter from despair and transformed him into a steadfast leader. It inspired the no-longer promiscuous Mary to mingle costly perfume with her tears in gratitude. It changed the contentious, power-hungry John into a gentle pastor who could write, "Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11). Ellen White makes an astounding observation when she counsels parents to love their children (and we think the principle applies even more widely to all family relationships):

The more unlovely they are, the greater pains you should take to reveal your love for them. When the child has confidence that you want to make him happy, love will break every barrier down. This is the principle of the Saviour's dealing with man; it is the principle that must be brought into the church. (White, 1952, p. 198)

As His disciples went forth into the world, people marveled at them and noted that they had "been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). Therein lies the secret of transformation in human hearts and relationships, of embellishing or perhaps creating or re-creating love—being with Jesus. Ellen White reminds us of the direct relationship between the time we spend in meditation on the life of Christ and the presence of love in our lives:

It would be well for us to spend a thoughtful hour each day in contemplation of the life of Christ. We should take it point by point, and let the imagination grasp each scene, especially the closing ones. As we thus dwell upon His great sacrifice for us, our confidence in Him will be more constant, *our love will be quickened*, and we shall be more deeply imbued with His spirit. (White, 1940, p. 83, emphasis added)

Divine love, which is not natural to us, will be poured out into our hearts as Jesus abides there through His Spirit (cf. Rom. 5:5).

When our sons came home from school that day bringing the sad announcement about the mother who abandoned her family, we sensed that unspoken worries might well lurk within them. So we wanted to do something that would signal our own commitment to stay together. That evening for family worship we took our then fifteen-year-old wedding photo album off the shelf and summoned our boys to sit with us on our sofa. With our arms around each other, we paged through it and smiled

with them at the young couple and all the happenings depicted on the pages. And there, before our sons, we pledged our love to each other again.

It is time for God's families to pledge love to each other, to celebrate love! As this 20<sup>th</sup> edition of the Family Ministries Planbook goes forth, it is with the prayer that the love of Jesus—unconditional, unchanging, self-giving, warm and compassionate—will be the unmistakable mark that distinguishes us as His people.

Karen and Ron Flowers, General Conference Family Ministries Directors Emeriti

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# Foreword

We enjoy celebrating love. Wedding anniversaries are among our favorite events to celebrate. Usually we go away--just the two of us--to a place where we can get away from our daily routines, to slow down long enough to reconnect with each other and acknowledge God's special gift in the person of our mate.

Several anniversary trips readily come to mind: the first; the fifth; the 10th; the 15th and 16th; the 20th and 25th; and of course the 26th; since as we are writing this piece we are flying back from that very celebration. Each of these outings have been special in their own unique ways. Celebration number 16th, however, holds a very special place in our hearts not only because the place we visited is one of our favorite cities in the world; but because of what this occasion did and continues to do for our marriage, even today.

It was on our 16th anniversary celebration when we got away for a long week-end that I (Willie) slowed down long enough to notice for the first time (I am a little embarrassed to admit) how much Elaine really likes flowers. This find, to be sure, changed the course of our lives and the quality of our marriage forever.

Since our 16th anniversary trip I (Willie) have made it a point to bring home flowers to Elaine at regular intervals. And I (Elaine) feel a special joy every time I receive flowers from Willie. The truth is, my elation goes beyond receiving the flowers--which I absolutely enjoy--to thinking about the fact that Willie values me and our marriage enough to do something over and over again he knows will bring me happiness.

Of course, there are a thousand other ways we may celebrate love in our families. Most importantly, however, is that we learn to be proactive and intentionally look for ways we may celebrate being in relationship with our children, our parents, our siblings, our in-laws, our friends and especially God. The better we love and find ways to foster love, the more we emulate God, grow closer to Him, and help hasten the coming of Jesus Christ.

1 John 4:7, 8, 11 declares: "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love...Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

Along with our colleagues Sally Lam-Phoon (Northern Asia-Pacific Division) and Edison Choque (South American Division) who helped us coordinate the development of this resource, we hope Adventist families around the world will take the time in 2011 to love one another as Christ has loved us. We pray this reality will become a catalyst for revival and reformation which we so desperately need as the people of God.

Elaine and Willie Oliver  
General Conference Directors of Family Ministries

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# *A Celebration of Love*

by John S. Nixon, Senior Pastor  
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I remember a Sunday morning when my wife brought me breakfast in bed. It was not my birthday or our anniversary. It was not even Valentine's Day. It was a day off, and I was sleeping late! She walked into the bedroom carrying a tray full of all my favorites: pancakes, eggs scrambled medium with a touch of cheddar, hash browns fried crisp and dark, a couple of Stripples and orange juice. In all my life I cannot remember being so happily awakened! As I finished off the last crumb I felt an intense sense of warmth toward her. If my wife had asked, I would have done anything for her that day. I would have gone to the shopping mall and window-shopped for two hours; I would have made all the beds and cleaned all the bathrooms in the house. I would even have watched figure skating with her on T.V. The feeling of warmth I felt that day signifies the power love has as a transforming influence, even though the expression may be a small deed of kindness. There is no more important arena for this expression of love than Christian marriage.

## **Target of the Enemy**

The marriage relationship stands at the foundation of all human associations—societal, industrial and religious. It is the cornerstone of human culture—for better or for worse—depending on its strength or weakness, its fidelity or infidelity, its durability or fleetingness. It is no surprise therefore, that marriage is the main target of the enemy's assaults as he tries to disqualify humanity for eternal salvation. Satan's success in our day at destabilizing this critical relationship among Christians and outside the church is alarming. Something has gone terribly wrong with the marriage relationship in modern time, including among Christians. The bond of marital love has become fragile and undependable, failing to hold together under the influence of diminished values, and leaving behind the devastation of broken hearts and broken homes.

The National Center for Health Statistics released a report in 2002 predicting that, based on then current trends, 43% of couples entering their first marriage would divorce within fifteen years (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001, p. 21). The U.S. Census Bureau, using a survey-based rather than a records-based model, released statistics in 2004 showing that, on average, first marriages will end in divorce after eight years (U. S. Census Bureau, 2004). According to federal census numbers, the "Bible Belt" states have the highest divorce rates in the nation. Except for Nevada, which provides "quickie" divorces, Arkansas, Alabama, Oklahoma, and Tennessee lead the nation in divorce. Between 1970 and 1996 the number of divorced people in America more than quadrupled from 4.3 to 18.3 million (Saluter & Lugaila, 1996.) New data now show that firstborn children in America are more likely to be born out-of-wedlock than to married parents (Stanley, 1998). Therefore, more than ever before, the understanding of marriage from the biblical standpoint and a recommitment to this vital relationship is essential if homes are to be stable and the church successful in carrying out its mission.

## Sacred Oneness

“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). With these words the indissoluble union of marriage is described in Scripture—two beings as a single organism sharing in each other’s lives as though it were one joint life. It is an awesome and sacred oneness that includes sexual union as an intimate and exclusive giving of oneself in love to the other. The Bible elevates marriage to a place of high honor by making it the symbol of the covenant of grace. In the book of Revelation, Jesus is depicted as the Bridegroom and the Church as His bride; the consummation of their union takes place at a wedding dinner known as the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9). Covenant relation is the basis of human life, as it is of the divine life. In the human family, male and female are made to be one, just as in the divine family God is One as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Relationship in the Bible is given the highest priority, higher even than commandment keeping. In fact, true commandment keeping is presented in Scripture as the living out of the love relationship with one another: “The commandments, ‘do not murder, do not steal, do not covet,’ and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law” (Romans 13:9, 10).

The home was the first institution to be affected by the curse of sin. After the promise of redemption was given in Genesis 3:15, the results of the Fall upon marriage—division and rivalry between husband and wife—were announced with these words: “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Genesis 3:16) This cryptic Old Testament description of the breakdown of marriage reveals the most vital obstacle to be overcome by Christian spouses, which is remedied only by the formula for marital bliss given in the New Testament. While the negative impact of dominance in the statement is obvious on the male side, the female action is less so. Isn’t a wife supposed to desire her husband?

**The meaning of desire.** The key to understanding the wife’s relation to her husband in the fall lies in decoding the key word “desire.” The use of the same Hebrew term in Genesis 4 helps to decipher its meaning here in chapter three. As God confronts Cain after the dastardly deed of murdering his brother, the Lord speaks these words of appeal and warning: “If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it” (Genesis 4:7).

Here the use of the word *desire* seems clearer. It alludes to sin’s potential impact on Cain in the form of control and mastery (Kostenberger & Jones, 2004, p. 54). Applied to the marital breakdown of Genesis 3, the word describes a cycle in which the wife attempts to control her husband through manipulation, while the husband tries to dominate his wife by force. It is a clear distortion of the one flesh ideal instituted by God in the beginning (Genesis 2:24). The question now becomes: How are Christian husbands and wives today to avoid the negative effect that naturally issues from fallen human nature? The answer lies in the principles for the marital relationship described in the Ephesians letter:

“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, His body, of which He is the Savior. . . . Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:21-23, 25).

## Self-sacrificing Love

In this command, the crowning virtue of the Christian marriage is shown to be love. Each is to love the other, as Christ instructed in John 13:34, but as head of the home, the husband is to take the lead in showing love. In fact, four times in Ephesians 5 Paul commands husbands to love their wives. In order to clarify what he means, he adds the descriptive phrase, “As Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her.” The cornerstone of Christian marriage therefore, is this self-sacrificing love after the example of Jesus Himself, whereby the husband carries out his response to “submit to one another.”

The foundation of this love relationship is mutual respect based on the creation of husband and wife in the image of God. The wife has inherent worth as an individual apart from whether or not or how she meets her husband’s needs. God created her and she is His child. The reference to the husband as “the head of the wife” does not mean that men are more valuable than women.

Husbands are commanded to love their wives, but the companion word “cherish” (Ephesians 5:29 NKJV) specifies the meaning. *Cherish* connotes the idea of “holding dear,” of treating someone with affection and caring. It is a word that implies sensitivity to a person’s deepest feelings and needs. Another definition of the word sheds more light on the principle behind it: “to retain in memory as a source of pleasure.” When a husband cherishes his wife, the very thought of her brings pleasure, and nothing could be more gratifying to a woman in love. When a woman gives her heart to a man she wants to know that she will be on his mind and in his heart. She wants a man with whom she can safely be vulnerable, who will not only never harm her himself, but will never knowingly expose her to harm. She wants a man who will go into the corner and kill the spider so she can go to sleep. She can kill the spider herself and, when her husband is not home, she does so. But she did not get married so she could do it herself. She married to give and receive love from someone who holds her dear and protects her. The first obligation of Christian husbands toward their wives is self-sacrificing love, which determines the nature of the provision and security he will provide.

## Respect

Christian wives are called to respect their husbands and to hold them in high esteem (Ephesian 5:33). Giving respect to her husband is a primary way whereby a Christian wife carries out her response to “submit to one another.” Respect is the attitude, submission is the act. Submission to one another out of reverence for Christ is God’s plan for the Christian home in a fallen world. The apostle Peter shows the unique connection between respect and beauty: “For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands.” (1 Peter 3:5)

In God’s estimation, respect for her husband makes a woman beautiful. It is a natural beauty that requires no cosmetics in which the Christian wife may grow the older she gets. There is however, a significant challenge in this command in the light of the history of female subjugation by men. Human society has a horrendous record of male suppression and abuse of women. In every generation and in every culture women have been denied the rights given to them by God, treated like second-class citizens in the best of times and like downright slaves in the worst of times. It is a part of recorded history and cannot be denied.

But we must never make the mistake of judging God by men. The God who created us would never sanction the abuse of even one woman. Peter is not describing female subjugation when he commands Christian wives to be submissive to their own husbands. He is describing a relationship of equals in which one partner wills to submit herself to the other so as to comply with God's order for the home. It does not diminish the wife to do so; on the contrary, says Peter, it makes her beautiful. There is an analogy to the Godhead that helps explain how this can be. God the Son submitted Himself to the Father for the sake of our redemption without losing one ounce of His divinity. It was the Son who left heaven to assume a low station in order to enact the plan of salvation. However, Jesus was not downgraded to a lesser status when He took on human flesh. On the night of His birth, holy angels who worship God alone worshipped Him as they filled the heavens with their songs (Luke 2:13, 14).

The order God has arranged for the home in the context of the Fall is in accordance with our natures as male and female. Just as love and affection help a woman blossom into her full potential, so respect and support help make him a better man. The confidence placed in him by his wife can help him undertake even greater things. He knows his companion believes in him; she is not bad-mouthing him behind his back. He can hold his head high in public because his wife is there for him, even though she knows more than anyone else that he is not perfect. The result is seen outside the home as well as within it: "Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land." (Proverbs 31:23).

### **The Distinction of Christian Marriage**

Christian marriage differs from secular marriage in a very significant way. It can be expressed as the difference between a covenant and a contract. A contract is an agreement between parties to perform services or provide goods in exchange for other goods or services. The basis is performance. If one party fails to deliver what he has promised, the contract is broken and the other party is freed from obligation. It is a 50-50 relationship.

A covenant, however, resembles a contract but the similarity is only superficial. A covenant is also an agreement between parties; in the case of marriage it is a legal arrangement with licensure, ceremony, and the filing of official documents. While these are the social conventions of the institution and have their place, these things are not the essence of a marriage. The New Testament word for covenant is *dia'theke* meaning will or testament, the ruling idea of which is one-sidedness. A will is not reciprocal. The testator gives all and receives nothing in return. A covenant represents an all-out commitment that is not 50-50, but 100%. This is the essence of marriage. By taking the marriage vow, both parties commit themselves to deliver on what they have promised regardless of the performance of the other. Here is where marriage shows sanctification. To be married means to accept your partner's imperfections, while remaining fully conscious of your own, and determining to practice toward one person in the world the full expression of the grace that you have received from God. Marriage is the golden opportunity to give to another person what Jesus has given to us—unconditional love.

The wedding vow embodies the essence of the marriage relation as an unparalleled commitment of one person to another. There are no "ifs" or "buts" in the promise of the vow, no exceptions, no disclaimers; there is not even anything stated about being loved in return. By this vow each partner takes full responsibility for the success of the marriage in an irrevocable way. The

challenge of marriage is not to love the person you thought you were marrying, but to love the person you actually did marry, who is only fully revealed in the after years. By following God's design for Christian marriage, the distortion of the Fall is overcome as the husband loves his wife with self-sacrificing love, and the wife respects and submits to her husband in everything.

### **Loving Each Other for Jesus' Sake**

There is a story of a stay-at-home wife who was angry with her husband for constantly coming home late. He was never on time for dinner at 6:00, even though they had both agreed to the schedule. So the wife resorted to stern measures. She made a rule that at 6:35 dinner would be put away! But she did not get the result she was hoping for. For the next three months the husband did not come home for dinner at all; he ate out. Then the wife's pastor gave her this suggestion: "Revoke your rule. Tell your husband you will feed him gladly no matter what time he comes home but you would appreciate it if he'd try to make it by 6:00. And what was the result? For the next three months the husband was home at 6:00 on the dot! (Timmons, 1983, p. 41).

It is a trivial example but the principle is sound. In marriage we have to give up ourselves, and someone has to take the first step. Someone has to be willing to sacrifice so that a new pattern can be established. Here is the key; do it for Jesus' sake. If you try to be a loving spouse for your own sake you will fail; you are not good enough to be loving all the time. If you try to do it for your spouse's sake, you will fail; your partner would have to be perfect to deserve unconditional love. But if you pledge to love each other for Jesus' sake, you will be empowered to be loving at all times; even when your spouse does not deserve it, and even when you do not feel like it. With Jesus at the center, every Christian marriage can become a celebration of love.

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# *Letting Go & Letting God*

by Sally Lam-Phoon, Director  
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“I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him. . . . So now I give him to the Lord” (1 Samuel 1:27, 28).

The times of 1 Samuel were hard times in Israel; there was oppression from many neighbors around them. The Philistines were constantly seeking to make war with them and to invade them. The nation of Israel was in trouble because as a people they had forgotten God. It was a time of great apostasy. Many of them worshipped the gods of their neighbors, like the god Baal. Nonetheless, God was still moving in the hearts of His people. He loved Israel and wanted to assure them that He would always be with them and that they could put their full trust in Him.

Elkanah, a faithful Levite, remained loyal to the true God, Jehovah. He kept his integrity no matter what others did, resolving that he and his household should serve the Lord. Every year, he faithfully made the journey to Shiloh, where God’s tabernacle was located, to worship and offer sacrifices to the Lord. Despite his loyalty to the principles of God, there was one area where he followed the local custom—his marriage. When his wife Hannah was unable to bear a child, he took a second wife. This mistake was to result in a lot of unhappiness in this Israelite home.

## **Hannah—Hope Amidst Hardship**

Hannah was infertile, at least temporarily so. Infertility in her time—not unlike our own—earned a woman ridicule and scorn. She suffered severely from the scorn of Peninnah, the fruitful second wife taken by Elkanah. Peninnah obviously found this an excellent way to score points with her husband and to demonstrate that she was worth far more than Hannah. Peninnah’s scorn and jealousy were no doubt fueled by Elkanah’s clear declaration that Hannah was his true love, his favorite.

So it is that we find Hannah in Shiloh for the yearly worship and sacrifice, feeling absolutely depressed. She was crying and crying and had lost her appetite. Her husband could not console her and could not understand why she should feel this way after all the love he had lavished on her. In 1 Samuel 1:9, 10 says that after one of their meals in Shiloh was over, Hannah stood and made her way to the temple. There she cried bitterly, inconsolably and prayed, bearing her soul before God. Priest Eli, in charge at the Shiloh temple, misunderstood her at first; he thought her tears, her closed eyes and moving lips meant she was drunk. When Hannah explained, he understood. He pronounced this blessing on her: “Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of Him” (1 Samuel 1:17).

That earnest prayer was answered shortly afterwards—Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son, whom she named “Samuel.” Thereafter, Hannah did not go on the yearly trips to Shiloh with Elkanah, but focused her attention on her child (v. 21). What a pleasure it must have been for her to

nurse Samuel and watch him grow. How exciting were his first halting steps and the day he started talking! Ellen G. White tells us that Hannah was careful to teach her son to love and reverence God above all else and to regard himself as the Lord's (White, 1958, p. 572). She intentionally led him to understand who God is and the purpose for which he had been given to her.

Then, when Samuel was weaned at the tender age of three (Morgan-Cole, 2008, p. 48), Hannah joined Elkanah once more to go to Shiloh. Little Samuel was in tow. It was on that visit that she fulfilled her vow, that if she should have a son, she would give him to the Lord. She left him in the care of Priest Eli who had blessed her as she made her vow years before.

**Stewardship of Samuel.** What were the feelings that went through Hannah as she left her little boy behind in Shiloh? What would you have felt if you had to do the same thing? From the Bible, we have no record that Hannah cried in anguish as she left her son behind. She was very logical and clear about the fact that this child belonged to God and, as God's steward, she only had the first three years of his life to shape and mold. Instead of grieving, she burst out in a prayer of praise and rejoicing about what the Lord had done for her (1 Samuel 2:1-10). She was focused on her promise and the purpose for which Samuel was given to her. She was to nurture this little boy who was to be returned to the Lord for ministry in the temple with Eli the priest. She had held him very close to her and taught him well. Now at three years of age, it was time for her to let him go.

While I'm sure that Hannah missed Samuel tremendously, she kept herself busy by sewing a special garment for him every year, one which she would give him when they met during the family's annual pilgrimage to Shiloh. Of this Mrs. White writes:

Every fiber of the little garment had been woven with a prayer that he might be pure, noble, and true. She did not ask for her son worldly greatness, but she earnestly pleaded that he might attain that greatness which Heaven values,—that he might honor God, and bless his fellow-men. (White, 1958, p. 572)

Hannah's story does not end there. Our generous God also blessed her with many more children—three more sons and two daughters (1 Samuel 2:21). When she determined to keep her promise to God at Shiloh, however, she was not in possession of this later blessing. In an act of great faith, she relinquished her only child to God.

### **Returning Children to God**

Under normal circumstances, God does not require us to give up our children at the tender age of three. However, the willingness of Hannah to let go when the time came for her to do so is a lesson all parents need to learn. When children are young, they need to be held very close, to be taught and instructed, to be shown what is right and wrong. But as the child develops and learns to reason and think for himself, parents need to help them develop that innate right given at Creation—the power to think and to choose. When we truly love our children, we need to recognize that we are merely stewards. Our responsibility is only for a brief time after which we need to return them to God so that they can relate to Him directly as His children.

“Parents, give your children to the Lord, and ever keep before their minds that they belong to Him, that they are the lambs of Christ’s flock, watched over by the True Shepherd,” counsels Ellen White (White, 1943, p. 143).

Giving birth to a child is easy enough for most, but the real challenge comes in the years that ensue, particularly during the teenage years when children assert their own independence. As parents, we have a responsibility and an awesome opportunity to help shape the child into what God wants Him to be. Unfortunately, many parents claim the children to be theirs and try to shape them to fulfill their own unfulfilled dreams, thus forcing them to grow up according to their own whims and wishes. But this is not how God sees parenting.

**Like flying a kite.** Parenting may be likened to flying a kite. God hands us the kite, our children, when they are born. He says, “Help me fly this kite for a while.” So as stewards, we help to launch the kite, holding the string close to us, helping the kite to lift and fly. As the kite catches the wind, flying higher and higher, we have to keep letting go of more and more string so that the kite can reach greater heights. Then one day, it is like God says, “Hand me back that string; this kite is mine and I will now fly it Myself.” When that happens, as parents, we have to learn to let go and let God. It may be painful, but each child comes to a point when they have to have their own relationship directly with God. God, it has been said, has no grandchildren.

Ellen White gives good advice to parents:

Human effort alone will not result in helping your children to perfect a character for heaven; but with divine help a grand and holy work may be accomplished.

When you take up your duties as a parent in the strength of God, with a firm determination never to relax your efforts nor to leave your post of duty in striving to make your children what God would have them, then God looks down upon you with approbation. He knows that you are doing the best you can, and He will increase your power. He will Himself do the part of the work that the mother or father cannot do; He will work with the wise, patient, well-directed efforts of the God-fearing mother.

Parents, gather the rays of divine light which are shining upon your pathway. Walk in the light as Christ is in the light. As you take up the work of saving your children and maintaining your position on the highway of holiness, the most provoking trials will come. But do not lose your hold. Cling to Jesus. He says, ‘Let him take hold of My strength, that he may make peace with Me; and he shall make peace with Me.’ Difficulties will arise. You will meet with obstacles. Look constantly to Jesus. When an emergency arises, ask, Lord, what shall I do now?

The harder the battle, the greater their [parents] need of help from their heavenly Father, and the more marked will be the victory gained.

Patiently, lovingly, as faithful stewards of the manifold grace of Christ, parents are to do their appointed work. It is expected of them that they will be found faithful. Everything is to be done in faith. Constantly they must pray that God will impart His grace to their children. Never must they become weary, impatient, or fretful in their work. They must cling closely to

their children and to God. If parents work in patience and love, earnestly endeavoring to help their children to reach the highest standard of purity and modesty, they will succeed. (White, 1952, pp. 207 - 208)

Hannah did her work faithfully, and never forgot her promise to God. She held Samuel close and taught him all she knew about God and God's will for him. When the time came, she was willing to release Samuel to the care of those who would further guide him spiritually. She consecrated him to God, young though he was. Hannah's case, of course, is an unusual one; most parents enjoy their role much longer before their children finally leave home. Godly parents like Hannah use whatever time they have to parent their children for God. When that time is completed, healthy parents take the next step. They let go and let God take over.

**Acknowledging our children's freedom of choice.** Lyn and Sam were conscientious parents, doing the best they could in bringing up their son, Don. Family worship, faithful Sabbath School and church attendance, Christian friends and Christian schools helped Don to grow up to be a strong Christian. As he left home to attend college, his parents ensured a solid foundation by sending him to an Adventist university, though it strained their finances.

After graduation, he found employment with a church organization. But his faith was severely tested there. The lackadaisical attitudes of older workers, lack of encouragement, and lack of passion for the gospel and for spreading the good news threw him into a spiritual crisis. It was then that he met a group of committed Christians from another denomination. After a three-year struggle, he decided to join them. Don was then 24 years of age.

Since his relationship with his parents was very close, Don sought their counsel right up to the moment that he decided to leave the Adventist Church. It was a painful process for him as well as for his parents, but Lyn and Sam decided that it was time to let go and allow him his freedom of choice. That must be a supreme value for us, even as it has always been for our Heavenly Father in His relationship with His children. Yes, when our children choose to leave the Adventist fold or seek to go elsewhere in their spiritual pursuit, we can only pray that they will remain true and faithful to God and allow the Lord to lead them.

## Conclusion

God loves our children. Truly, He loves them even more than we do. When we release them to Him, we can know that we are putting them into the care of the One who watches over Israel, who never slumbers nor sleeps (cf. Ps. 121:4). Ultimately, our children have to relate to God on their own as they come of age, rather than relating to God through us. The words of the young woman Ruth to her mother-in-law Naomi express the faith we seek to cultivate in our offspring: "Your God [will be] my God" (Ruth 1:16). It is crucial for us as parents to know how and when to make that transition in our parenting, to let go and let God take over. It is a moment when our faith grasps hold of God's promises as perhaps no other time in our experience of parenting. We can continue to pray earnestly for them as we hand them back to God.

So let us with full confidence entrust our children to our Heavenly Father. Let us rest in this thought: when Jesus comes and the crown of immortal glory is placed on the heads of the redeemed, many will raise their crowns in sight of the assembled universe and pointing to godly parents will say,

“[They] made me all I am through the grace of God. [Their] instruction, [their] prayers, have been blessed to my eternal salvation” (White, 1954, p. 564).

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# *How to Face a Family Crisis*

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The following sermon is based on Abraham's and Sarah's experience in Egypt. It shows how God intervenes and the divine methods used to resolve a family crisis when humanly there seems no way out.

## **Introduction**

<sup>10</sup> Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe. <sup>11</sup> As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. <sup>12</sup> When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. <sup>13</sup> Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you."

<sup>14</sup> When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that she was a very beautiful woman. <sup>15</sup> And when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace. <sup>16</sup> He treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and maidservants, and camels.

<sup>17</sup> But the LORD inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai. <sup>18</sup> So Pharaoh summoned Abram. "What have you done to me?" he said. "Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? <sup>19</sup> Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her to be my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!" <sup>20</sup> Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had (Genesis 12:10-20).

This episode clearly shows a family in crisis. First, the family feels the impact of an external crisis, that is, one brought on by external forces out of the family's control. The family also has to deal with an internal crisis, the infidelity brought on by one of the spouses, putting at risk the family's balance.

## **When the Family Faces an Economic Crisis**

The Bible says: "Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe" (vs. 10). The first crisis faced by Abraham is that of famine in the land. It is an economic problem, a subsistence problem. In the face of it, he makes a hard decision, no doubt tough to do. Many peoples of the earth are not strangers to crises involving famine, hunger and subsistence. In many cases, crises are not necessarily the consequences of human behavior; they are the simple results of circumstances beyond human control.

The story's highlight appears when we think about this question: In which "land" was there hunger? Reviewing the text, we find out that Egypt was not that land; the hunger was not there. Egypt was where Abraham was headed, to resolve the subsistence crisis. Then what land is Genesis referring to? Is it talking about Canaan?

Is it possible that there is hunger in the Promised Land? Please, you say, that is impossible! There could not be starvation in Canaan. How can someone even think of lack of food in Promised Land, where milk and honey flows? It is hard to believe that God called Abraham out of Ur, a place of abundance and civilization, to bring him to Canaan where he would go hungry. So then, where was the hunger? We cannot wait any longer for the answer. Yes, there was famine, hunger and starvation in Canaan, the Promised Land. Genesis 12:5 confirms: “They set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.”

Here we have a clear message for us today: There could be hunger in the Promised Land! That is, as Christian families we are not exempt from problems. We face crises, even when we are following God’s steps. Let us remember there was a terrible storm in the Sea of Galilee and it affected even the boat where Jesus and His disciples were. Lazarus died even though he was Jesus’ best friend. In fact, God has not promised that we will never have problems or crises. What He really promised was that He will always be close to His children in times of crisis to support them. Recall the words of Psalm 23:

Even though I walk  
through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil,  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me (Psalm 23:4).

It might be possible that your family is going through financial problems, going “hungry.” You ask yourself, is it possible that this is happening when I am walking close to God? Remember Abraham. Hunger was present even in the Promised Land to which God had called Him. Remember that, as God was close to him, so in the moment of your crisis God will be close to you. Behind every crisis there is a great opportunity.

Why did God let the Promise Land go through famine and starvation? It is not easy to answer. Ellen G. White comments:

The Lord in His providence had brought this trial upon Abraham to teach him lessons of submission, patience, and faith—lessons that were to be placed on record for the benefit of all who should afterward be called to endure affliction. (White, 1958, p. 129)

Through the famine in Canaan, God prepared Abraham to accomplish much for Him. The record of Abraham’s experience provides lessons of hope for us.

For one thing, we know God wanted to evangelize Egypt. And for this job He chose His best evangelists in Abraham and Sarah to go to that great nation and bear witness to Him. However, as it turned out, any testimony that Abraham could have given for God in Egypt was undermined by the lie he told.

Sometimes we do not know why we are where we are. Some people have to live in a difficult area or country; others are studying in a non-Christian environment and face hard trials there. God, however, has a very important purpose behind every difficulty we go through. At the same time, he

has given us a special task that is our responsibility to accomplish. Even angels are willing to go on such missions and endure such hardship, but such a privilege belongs to us.

At the moment of economic crisis, families may be tempted to turn away from God. They let slip their values of honesty and integrity and loyalty to Him. However, when the family retains its honesty, integrity and loyalty to God in the midst of a crisis, it can be a powerful influence in favor of good. There is a marvelous promise in the Bible to which we can cling in faith: “I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread” (Psalm 37:25). God never leaves the righteous, His children, alone. On the contrary, crises can prepare us and help us to face even bigger challenges.

### **When Families Face a Moral Crisis**

Let us now concentrate on the internal family crisis, a circumstance that resulted from the behavior of the family members themselves. The Bible text says:

<sup>11</sup> As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, “I know what a beautiful woman you are. <sup>12</sup> When the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife.’ Then they will kill me but will let you live. <sup>13</sup> Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you (Gen.12:11-13).

Abraham spoke of his wife’s beauty as they got to Egypt. Perhaps this sudden recognition was because he compared her beauty with that of the local ladies. It seems, however, that the acknowledgement was less a compliment than an expression that this quality she possessed would pose a problem. Her beauty was a liability to him. This “compliment” was not a compliment at all!

True compliments and affirmation—not only of beauty or handsome physique, but of all a spouse’s virtues—are crucial to the maintenance of good emotional health in marriage. Honest compliments should be given regularly. Let us make such compliments a regular custom throughout marriage—not just during dating and engagement!

From this experience of Abraham, we garner the important lessons of taking responsibility and of maintaining truth and integrity. According to the Bible text, Abraham, because of his wife’s beauty, starts fearing for his own life. The problem began when the Egyptians admired Sarah’s fairness and beauty and word reached the palace of Pharaoh. Abraham concealed that she was his wife. For that reason, Pharaoh’s emissaries suddenly appeared with presents, ready to convert Abraham’s “sister” into Pharaoh’s wife. Abraham allowed the scheme to play out. Though Sarah was placed in great peril, Abraham would be safe, even elevated in privilege as the brother-in-law of Pharaoh.

Abraham thought that the problem he faced was Sarah’s beauty, but her beauty was not really the problem. Nor was their marriage to each other the problem, though he thought that by denying they were married he would make life in Egypt easier. Abraham neither recognized the nature of his problem—his fear and lack of faith in God, nor did he take responsibility for his problem. By commanding Sarah: “Say you are my sister . . .” Abraham passed the responsibility for his problem to Sarah. He told her to lie for him!

In truth Abraham and Sarah were half siblings (see Gen. 20:12), so Abraham reasoned that what he asked Sarah to do was not really to tell a lie. But neither was it truth, for he had married her. They were legally husband and wife. Half-lies, half-truths always compromise integrity. In the world that we live in, people value honesty, truth and integrity less and less every day. We live in an immoral culture and sometimes this immoral culture infiltrates our church.

Abraham apparently never thought through what could really happen because of a seemingly insignificant lie. People usually call this type of little lies “white lies,” i.e., harmless, inoffensive, perhaps even beneficial lies. However, “No deviation from strict integrity can meet God’s approval” (White, 1958, p. 130). Abraham’s lack of moral strength and integrity affected his whole family. He did not defend his spouse, but left her to fend for herself in the household of a heathen king. Nor did he defend marriage, but treated it as a casual thing, to be discarded for his convenience.

Imagine the scene: As Sarah is carried away from their home by an Egyptian limousine (a chariot), Abraham watches without doing anything. It is too late now to tell the truth. His wife disappears from view and he senses that this is not a vacation; she is gone for good. A chill must have gone down his spine. His beloved wife, who had accompanied him on the long journey to Canaan and now to Egypt, is on her way to Pharaoh’s arms. And it is because of what he thought was a harmless white lie . . . . That first night and the following ones must have been indescribable. Now he is on his bed alone. Her clothes, her perfume, and all of the beautiful memories . . . . His heart must have agonized over the situation.

Sometimes we indulge in things that may seem harmless, but which really threaten conjugal happiness—pornography, familiarities with the opposite sex, life-threatening habits like using alcohol, tobacco and drugs, or involvement with illegal activities. Sooner or later these will cause pain and create crises in our families.

“Why didn’t I tell them she was my wife?” Answering this question will not cure the malady of his soul. The real question for Abraham is, “Why did I not put my trust in God? He would have protected me . . . .” “In concealing the fact that Sarah was his wife, he betrayed a distrust of the divine care, a lack of that lofty faith and courage so often and nobly exemplified in his life” (White, 1958, p. 130). There we have the cause of the problem.

In Abraham’s case, the problem became irremediable. From a human point of view, to recover his wife was a mission impossible. But “with God all things are possible” (see Matt. 19:26). Man’s extremity is God’s opportunity.

Abraham’s and Sarah’s story does not end there. Verse 17 shows how God intervened to restore happiness to their desperate hearts: “But the LORD inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram’s wife Sarai” (Gen. 12:17). Is it not fantastic to know how God gets involved in our lives to fix our problems, just when we think all is ruined because of our flawed and self-centered choices?

God’s methods are different from ours: Plagues! Pharaoh is getting ready to “meet” his new wife; she will be part of his personal collection. However, that same night plagues touch Pharaoh’s household.

This makes him ask, “Why is it that since you arrived to the palace all these plagues are coming?”

Sarah replies, “The man that you call my brother is not only my brother but also my husband.”

Oh, so that’s what it is...! Those terrible plagues guided Pharaoh to the truth. Abraham is summoned to the court.

“What have you done to me?” Pharaoh said. “Why didn’t you tell me she was your wife? <sup>19</sup> Why did you say, ‘She is my sister,’ so that I took her to be my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!” (Gen. 12:18, 19)

Even though Abraham has to face Pharaoh’s indignation and leave Egypt, he has Sarah back! She is leaving with him! Abraham’s lack of faith put Sarah’s life in danger, but God in his great mercy has saved the patriarch’s family. This shows us that God is interested in saving homes. His plan is to keep marriages from divorce.

## Conclusion

Many people, because of their indifference to God, begin to falter in faith and miss His blessings in their lives. While some crises are beyond human control, often pain and suffering come to families because of faulty choices. Thousands have destroyed their happiness because of a little mistake. Allowing even little mistakes to go uncorrected can destroy a couple’s love, so that they reach a point where they find that the closeness and intimacy of their younger years are now gone.

Happily there is nothing impossible for God. Though we may find hunger in the Promised Land, behind every crisis God has a plan for our benefit and our family’s benefit. God will never allow circumstances to come upon His children beyond what we can manage. “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it” (1 Cor. 10:13).

If we let God into our lives, if we cry out for Him, He will intervene in His own way and will rebuild what has been destroyed by our own hands. Sometimes His methods are drastic, but always His only intention is to restore the happiness of a couple’s marriage.

**Appeal.** Do you feel that somehow you have lost God’s plan for your life? Do you feel that you have destroyed the harmony in your marriage and need God’s supernatural intervention right now? This is the right moment to ask God to intervene and help you to rebuild and fix what has been destroyed. God is a specialist in this kind of impossible case. Come, ask for a miracle.

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# *Celebrate Your Marriage!*

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## **Introduction**

Most of us love celebrations! We celebrate birthdays; we celebrate anniversaries. We celebrate religious holidays and special political days. We celebrate all kinds of accomplishments – like getting a new job or a promotion, or being accepted into or graduating from a college or university. We also celebrate extraordinary events like a wedding, a child’s birth, someone’s baptism or ordination, and many other special times.

This is a seminar on celebrating *marriage*. We invite you to think with us about how you can celebrate *your* marriage—not only on your wedding anniversary, but at many other times, for many other reasons, and in many different ways.

**Couple activity.** *Invite couples to reflect on the following questions:*

- Where did you learn about marriage? Which of the following influences has had the greatest impact on your understanding of marriage and relationships?
  - TV sitcoms
  - TV reality shows
  - Courses
  - Locker room discussions
  - Parents
  - Scripture
  - Something/someone else \_\_\_\_\_
  
- What advice have your parents given you on marriage? What advice did you once reject but later realized it was sound? What happened? What differences will that make in your future decisions?
  
- Have you ever said, “If only I knew then what I know now.” What is it that you have learned and how has that changed life in marriage for you?

## **Calls to Celebration**

In the Bible, celebrating was something God’s people did on special occasions and at special events.

- **The Sabbath.** The Sabbath was a day to celebrate: “From evening to evening, you shall *celebrate* your Sabbath” (Lev. 23:32 NKJV, italics supplied).
- **Festivals and holy days.** See the use of “celebrate” in Leviticus 23:41; Esther 9:21, 27.
- **Special occasions.** The Jews celebrated the rebuilding of the temple and the city of Jerusalem. “Now at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought out the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to *celebrate the dedication* with gladness, both with thanksgivings and singing, with cymbals and stringed instruments and harps” (Neh. 12:27 NKJV, italics supplied).
- **Weddings.** Weddings were occasions for celebration, such as the wedding festival which Jesus and his disciples attended (John 2:1-11).

So we find good scriptural support for having times of celebration in our lives. We believe marriage deserves to be celebrated often, in special ways. Though Ellen White doesn’t use the word “celebrate,” she was emphatic that there should be repeated affirmation of their marriage by the marital partners:

Continue the early attentions. In every way encourage each other in fighting the battles of life. Study to advance the happiness of each other. Let there be mutual love, mutual forbearance. Then marriage, instead of being the end of love, will be as it were the very beginning of love. The warmth of true friendship, the love that binds heart to heart, is a foretaste of the joys of heaven. (White, 1952, p. 106)

### **Celebrate Your Marriage Daily**

♥ **Kiss each other every day.** “As Time Goes By” is a 1931 song composed by Herman Hupfeld. It became famous in 1942 when it was sung by Sam (Dooley Wilson) in the movie *Casablanca*. Memorable lines in the lyrics are:

You must remember this  
A kiss is just a kiss, a sigh is just a sigh.  
The fundamental things apply  
As time goes by.

Kissing daily is one of those fundamental things that apply to every healthy marriage relationship as time goes by.

**Couple activity.** *Provide couples with a blank sheet of paper on which they can write their answers to the following: When do couples typically kiss? List as many occasions as you can think of, i.e., to greet each other after being apart, etc. Then, list the times when you kiss each other.*

As time passes, a lot of the kissing that takes place between husbands and wives is no more than a quick peck on the cheek or lips. However, Ellen Kreidman, author of *The 10 Second Kiss*, suggests that in order to maintain a healthy, vibrant, passionate marriage, couples should kiss for ten seconds. She writes,

When a couple stands at the altar and vows to love each other “till death do us part,” they take for granted that they will stay intimately connected forever. The kiss at the end of the ceremony is symbolic of that connection, and throughout the relationship the kiss remains at the core. The kiss is the most intimate connection possible between two people—even more intimate than sexual intercourse . . . . (Kreidman, 1998, p. 19)

The kiss is deeply expressive of the relationship. It is a barometer of how things are going. A couple can be having sex but not kissing. If they are not kissing passionately the relationship may very well be in trouble. Almost without noticing it, they may become simply roommates and no longer lovers. Kreidman contends that the ten-second kiss can be a remedy to retrieve romance:

Engaging in a ten-second kiss every day declares that you are lovers—not just roommates. It helps you stay connected. Even though you may tell your mate you love them every day, giving them a ten-second kiss tells them, “I’m still in love with you.”

The ten-second kiss has a more immediate and dramatic effect on a relationship than any other homework I’ve ever assigned. Given in the morning, it sets the tone for the rest of the day. Given early in the evening, it sets the mood for the rest of the night. No matter what time of day you kiss, you’ll feel warm, close, and connected. (p. 23)

We want you to reach for your mate tonight and give them a passionate 10-second kiss. When they say, “What’s gotten into you?” you can tell them, “We are not going to be roommates anymore. From now on we are lovers again.”

Before you kiss, you may feel embarrassed, uncomfortable, tense, annoyed, and even distant. But when you do it anyway, the result is almost always the same—you feel closer, warmer, more connected. When we kiss, we are exchanging our breath with one another. “When we exchange breath, we are breathing in our mate’s life force, his energy and he is breathing in ours. In this way, we actually become one” (Kreidman, 1998, p. 41).

**Couple activity.** *Let’s stop right now and begin to practice this simple remedy to a sluggish relationship. Please stand, face each other, put your arms around each other, and I will count to ten so you know when to stop. Ready, set, kiss!*

♥ **Give 30 minutes of undivided attention to each other every evening.** For years we have suggested a simple formula to improve any marriage:

Spend undivided attention with your spouse, a minimum of

- 30 minutes every day
- 1 whole evening each week
- 1 whole day each month
- 1 whole weekend each quarter

Through the rest of this seminar we will refer to each of these time periods as crucial to the celebration of your marriage. First, let’s talk about the daily minimum: 30 minutes of undivided attention each day. In an Internet article entitled “Spend 30 Minutes a Day Talking,” Kreidman cites startling data on the communication patterns of American couples:

The average American couple spends 20 minutes a week talking. That averages out to 3 minutes a day. That includes Good Morning. What's for dinner? Any mail? How are the kids? How was work?

What do you know of, that can survive on 3 minutes? Could you study for 3 minutes a day and hope to pass a course? Could you raise kids on 3 minutes a day? Could you have fallen in love if you spent 3 minutes a day together?

So how can we spend 3 minutes a day and think we'll have a meaningful relationship? WE CAN'T! (Kreidman, 2010b)

Against this backdrop, Kreidman makes her recommendation to spend 30 minutes each day talking. We echo her sentiments. We find evening to be a good time. You should be alone as a couple. Your time should be uninterrupted. And each partner's attention to the other should be *undivided*. By undivided attention we mean no TV, radio, computers, cell phones, magazines, books, household chores, children, friends, family, etc. should intrude.

**Couple activity.** *Provide couples with a blank sheet of paper. Invite them to list times when they have spent time like this with each other. What new ideas do you have about how you could spend those thirty minutes each day to celebrate each other and your relationship? After a few minutes, invite couples to volunteer to share from their lists. Share your own ideas as a leader or leader couple. Kreidman lists the following which may be helpful to stimulate additional ideas:*

- Go for a nice long walk, holding hands, of course.
- Go for a ride in the car and stop at a secluded spot.
- Go to an informal restaurant to talk over a hot drink.
- Sit down in your favorite room; put on some soft music and just talk. (Kreidman, 2010b)

♥ **“Remember when . . . .”** A fun way to celebrate your marriage is by recalling happy memories, remembering where you have been and how you got where you are. Ellen G. White wrote of the church, “We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history” (White, 1893). The same can be said of our marriages: We have nothing to fear for the future except as we forget all that God has done for us as a couple in the past.

You could make a marriage celebration game out of “Remember when . . . ?” Select one special event that happened in your life, gather up any pictures you have of it, and talk about the people, the place(s), the fun memories (or even the sad ones) that brought you together at the time.

Some additional ideas:

- Plan a Saturday night to watch “old” family movies.
- Look through family photo albums together.
- Make a scrap book together.
- Write your favorite memories down on small pieces of paper.
- Designate a special vase in which to drop these memories. Watch as the recorded memories fill the container over the years.

## Celebrate Your Marriage Weekly

♥ **Give each other one whole evening each week.** Set aside one evening every week to spend together. Be faithful to this commitment with your spouse. Honor the date in your calendar as you would other fixed appointments. Arrange for childcare for your children. Model to your children that time with each other is a priority!

It was American singer and songwriter Harry Chapin who composed the words, “I let time go lightly when I’m here with you . . .” Let that be true of your evenings spent together as a couple. Enjoy the time. Put the watch away. Let your time together go lightly!

♥ **Go on a marriage date.** Date again! Woo your mate. Surprise her with flowers. Surprise him with tickets to a ball game. Get all dressed up and eat dinner by candlelight. For more ideas you can refer to the Resource list attached at the end or log on to <http://www.bride.net/2009/inexpensive-date-ideas/>

**Couple activity.** *Provide couples with a blank sheet of paper. Invite them to list some of the things they did on dates together before they were married. Then give time for each to plan one date night for a time in the near future. After five minutes, let spouses share with their mates their date night plan.*

♥ **Put sex on your calendar.** Says Ellen Kreidman, “This week I want you to put sex on the calendar. You heard me right! Yes, I want you to plan for it. . . . So take out your calendars and schedule in a night of lovemaking. Making the decision in advance to have sex creates anticipation and can make sex just as exciting as when you were dating” (Kreidman, 2010a).

Prepare for your special romantic time together. Have on hand his favorite cologne or her favorite perfume. Promise a massage with special body oil or lotion. Send a love letter or text message about how you can’t wait! Play romantic music while in your bedroom.

## Celebrate Your Marriage Monthly

♥ **Spend a day together.** Spend an entire day together every month. Plan something—but not household chores or home projects—that will build your friendship in marriage. Take a day away from the routine, perhaps enjoying a new hobby together, or actually getting away from home to enjoy the scenery or explore the region where you live. Budget-friendly activities abound that will spare the family budget additional strain. However, we can promise that the reward for your investment of time and money in this monthly marriage celebration day will be well worth whatever you spend.

**Couple activity.** *Give each couple a sheet of paper which they divide into four sections by creasing it. Put the following category headings in the four sections: (1) Sports/Exercise; (2) Local culture/History/Seasonal events; (3) Shopping; (4) Hobbies. The object is to list as many different activities that couples can enjoy in each category as possible. For example: Under Sports/Exercise you might list biking, hiking, roller/ice skating, spelunking; Local culture/History/Seasonal events—visiting museums, zoos, fairs, garage sales, antique auctions, antique auto shows, picking fruit, attending plays or musicals; Shopping—bookstores, cooking/hobby/art/gardening stores; Hobbies—*

*painting, flower arranging, gardening, bird watching. After ten minutes, invite couples to read their lists aloud to the other couples, adding additional activities to their lists as they hear them mentioned by others.*

♥ **Participate in a marriage-strengthening event.** Often we must learn new ways to manage or improve our relationships. Attending a marriage program or marriage conference provides a couple with a great “booster shot.” Such events are times when structured programs afford opportunity to address in a guided way issues that we may otherwise avoid. They are times of intentional growth.

When marriage programs are not available, choose a book on a topic of marital growth and read it together, pausing to discuss new concepts and to think about how they could be worked into your relationship. Looking for ways to keep growing together as a couple is a sign of strength, not weakness.

### **Celebrate Your Marriage Quarterly**

♥ **Get away for a weekend.** One weekend per quarter for each other is a definite part of our marriage success formula. Why not get away for that weekend? Leave work and worries behind. A weekend gives you the opportunity to be with each other in a variety of contexts, sleeping, eating, relaxing, worshipping and playing together. It’s an extended time to re-connect with one another and to focus on the gift in each other that God has given you. An entire weekend affords more time to enjoy some of the activities that could not be fitted into the one day per month.

♥ **Honor a marriage that has made a difference for you.** No doubt you can think of some couples in your family or in your community whose marriage has been exemplary to you and made a significant positive impact on your own lives personally or as a couple. Why not plan a time to honor them and tell them what they mean to you? Invite relatives and neighbors to participate.

♥ **Give marriage celebration coupons.** Create a coupon book for your spouse, offering them coupons such as one night out, back rub or massage, car wash, special date night, etc.

**Couple activity.** *Provide a copy of the handout Marriage Celebration Coupons to each spouse. Allow a few minutes for them to prepare and give one or more of these to their partner.*

### **Celebrate Your Marriage Annually**

♥ **Make the most of your anniversary.** Your wedding anniversary is the major event of the year to celebrate your marriage. Plan for this day well in advance so that it becomes a very memorable day.

Ideas abound for celebrating your anniversary. The Internet has several sites to jumpstart your creative juices such as <http://ezinearticles.com/?7-Ways-To-Celebrate-Your-Wedding-Anniversary&id=231765>. Remember that gifts to your beloved that reflect your own intimate thoughts about him or her and your marriage are most appreciated. Here are some additional ideas:

- Write your beloved a poem, love song, or love letter.

- Propose to your spouse all over again, but in a different way. Your spouse will be pleased to know that you would do it all AGAIN!
- Create an anniversary photo collection. Put together a slide show of photos from previous anniversaries and add the current collection to it.
- Start a wedding anniversary journal or memory book. Search for “wedding anniversary journal” or “wedding anniversary memory book” on the Internet for samples.

## Celebrate Your Spouse

♥ **Celebrate the person.** The wise man has written, “Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice with the wife of your youth” (Prov. 5:18 NKJV). Let your marriage partner know regularly that he or she is a person whom you respect, appreciate, and cherish.

♥ **Celebrate the accomplishments.** Acknowledge pay raises, educational pursuits, a new job, an idea, etc. Let them know that you are proud of what they have accomplished and ways that God has led them.

Make a list of all you like and appreciate about your spouse. Every time they do or say something, normal or special, add it to the list (mowing the lawn, cooking a meal, putting up a picture frame on the wall, changing a diaper, etc.). Share that list with your spouse and keep adding to it.

♥ **Celebrate his or her birthday.** Praise God for another year of life that God has given your spouse—another year to be with you!

♥ **Celebrate your differences.** Some people believe that opposites attract, while others believe that opposites attack. God created us as males and females to be different, but complementary. When Adam was created, he “gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper *comparable* to him” (Genesis 2:20 NJKV, italics supplied). While they were different, they were *comparable*. The Hebrew terms used signify one who in position is “corresponding to him,” “his counterpart,” and “his complement.” One way to celebrate your marriage is to praise God for the way He has made you as male and female, and brought you together as husband and wife.

It becomes easier to celebrate our differences when we learn to view them, not as liabilities, but as assets. These assets God has given to us to enable us as a couple to accomplish something significant for Him, something which neither of us would have been unable to do alone, but which we can do together thanks to the combination of who we are together.

**Couple activity.** *Distribute the handout Reframing Our Differences. Invite couples to consider the list of characteristics typical of women and men. Put a check-mark by each of the statements that apply to you. As you look at these lists, talk about how those differences can be or have been beneficial to your relationship. How might you more fully accept, respect and even treasure the differences?*

## Closing Thoughts

Do you remember the day of your wedding? Think of it: the preparation, the ceremony, and then the celebration at the reception? Ask yourself: Why should the celebration stop after the cake has been cut and the guests have departed? We believe the celebrating should go on, every day, for always!! With thoughtful, intentional planning you can make it happen!

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## *Celebrate Your Marriage* **Resources**

Dena. (2009, September 30). Inexpensive date ideas. Retrieved August 4, 2010, from <http://www.bride.net/2009/inexpensive-date-ideas/>

You can be married and go on dates. Spending quality time together is important to maintain a healthy marriage relationship.

Godek, Gregory J. P. (2010). 50 ways to woo your lover. Retrieved August 4, 2010, from <http://www.rd.com/living-healthy/50-ways-to-woo-your-lover/article12676.html>

Creative, outrageous, affordable, quick and classic ways to add romance to your relationship.

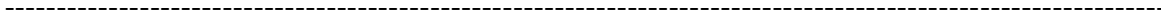
Marriage Proposal Ideas – Classic, Romantic and Fun. Retrieved August 4, 2010, from <http://www.danforthdiamond.com/marriage-proposal-ideas/>

A dozen or more of the most romantic ways to propose marriage.

Sibal, Anna Lynn. Celebrating a wedding anniversary. *Wedding Anniversary*. Retrieved August 4, 2010, from <http://www.allweddingideas.com/wedding-anniversary.shtml>

Couples celebrating a wedding anniversary are customarily given specific gifts corresponding to the number of years they have been married. A listing of traditional and modern anniversary gifts as compiled and popularized by the Chicago Public Library.

*Marriage Celebration Coupons*



Dear \_\_\_\_\_

This Marriage Celebration Coupon is good for:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Love, \_\_\_\_\_



Dear \_\_\_\_\_

This Marriage Celebration Coupon is good for:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Love, \_\_\_\_\_



Dear \_\_\_\_\_

This Marriage Celebration Coupon is good for:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Love, \_\_\_\_\_

### *Reframing Our Differences*

<b>While Women tend to...</b>	<b>Men tend to...</b>
Be other-focused	Be self-focused
Be more cooperative	Be more competitive
Over-identify with people	Over-identify with work
Need more closeness	Need more distance
Fear abandonment	Fear engulfment
Talk mostly about people	Talk mostly about things
Be more indirect in speaking	Be more direct in speaking
Search more for hidden meanings	Take words at face value
Like to talk a problem out and take time with decisions	Be more decisive and solve problems immediately
Be better listeners	Struggle for dominance and control of conversation
Avoid intimidation	Attempt to intimidate
Avoid conflict and confrontations	Like conflict, power struggles, and confronting others
Admit wrongs and blame themselves	Apologize only when it's expected and unavoidable
Be comfortable expressing emotions	Be taught not to show emotion
Repress their anger	Express their anger
Be less afraid of commitment	Fear or avoid commitment
Want more love in relationships	Want more sex in relationships
Be more giving	Be more cautious and conscious of what they'll get
Seek the approval of others	Do what pleases them
Be emotionally jealous and fear loss of emotional commitment	Be more sexually jealous and fear loss of control

From Craig, B. (2004). *Searching for intimacy in marriage*. Silver Spring, MD: Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, p. 92. Used by permission.

# *Bridging The Love Gap*

by Sally Lam-Phoon, Director  
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Recent decades have witnessed unusual stresses in families. Alarming rates of child abuse, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and domestic violence give evidence in every culture that the family is in serious trouble. When its families are in trouble, a nation is in trouble. Clearly, families everywhere—in the church and in our surrounding communities—need information and interventions that can help them grow toward optimal health.

One area in which families need help is in understanding how to really love their children. Most parents strive to love their children; we assume this as the norm. But why is it that, even though parents say they love their kids, the kids don't think so? This is what we call a *love gap*. Today, most parents work hard to earn enough money to insure a good future for their children, wanting them to have a better home, a better education, a better future than the parents had. Yet so many times, parents feel that the more they do, the less the children seem to understand and appreciate their good intentions. As much as parents are concerned for their kids, there is no guarantee that the outcomes will always be what parents intended them to be.

What can be done to bridge the love gap? How can parents love their children so the young people will feel loved?

## **Family Pressures Felt by Parents and Children**

Both parents and children face real pressures in life today that have profound effects on their behavior in relationships.

*Small group exercise. In small groups, invite parents to share some of the pressures and realities they feel in their parenting. What pressures are their children facing? After 10-15 minutes, debrief the groups. In summary, highlight the following points, some of which will likely be identified in the small group discussion:*

### **Parent pressures.**

- Some parents feel like they work their hearts out but aren't appreciated for it.
- Some feel like they have to be "heavy" with their kids, constantly correcting and disciplining them to keep them on the safe and narrow path.
- Some feel that they are giving and sacrificing their all, only to see their child's behavior and relationship with them deteriorate day by day.
- Some feel guilty because, even though they love their kids, they often feel stressed or hopeless around them.
- Sometimes they feel that their children resent them. (Clinton & Sibcy, 2006, p. 16)

### **Children's pressures.**

- Children and adolescents face issues that were not present a generation ago.

- Statistics gathered in the United States paint a scary picture:
  - Every 9 seconds a high school student drops out.
  - Every 23 seconds an unmarried mother gives birth.
  - Every 4 minutes a child is arrested for drug abuse.
  - Every 8 minutes a child is arrested for violent crimes.
  - Every 41 minutes a child or teen dies in an accident.
  - Every 5 hours a child or teen commits suicide. (Clinton & Sibcy, 2006, p. 15)

**Rising teen crime in Asia.** A recent issue of Singapore’s *Straits Times* blamed errant parenting for the rising wave of teen crimes in Singapore and the rest of Asia. Love-starved teenagers fall into bad company, the paper noted, and teens who lack attention and supervision from parents or who experience too much control by authoritarian parents may be driven to commit crimes. Parents who spank their children and even their teenagers, claim that they do it because they love them and want them to change for the better. But this may result in young people being driven over the edge and into a life of crime (Teo, 2010).

**Children cry out to be understood.** An article in the *Japan Times* of Sept. 26, 2001 notes that we should try to restore dialogue with our children. Behind their sudden acts of violence lies the unspoken cry that “others just don’t understand my feelings.”

**Class exercise.** *What are these news clippings really saying? What do you think is the relationship between the unmet needs of young people and their behavior? What is the message for parents in this?*

## Why the Love Gap?

It is interesting that, while most parents are really anxious to love their children, the children themselves actually feel that they are not being loved. They especially seem to feel this way when anxious parents *overprotect*, *over-control* and *overindulge* (Clinton & Sibcy, 2006, p. 5). Let’s explore these parental behaviors.

**“Mother Hen” parenting (overprotection).** *Leaders can read or tell in their own words the story of Tim that follows. Alternatively, pass out printed copies of the story. Invite participants to work in small groups in which they discuss the question: What are the evidences of overprotection in the case study?*

### Tim

*At two years old, little Tim was small for his size. Being born prematurely to parents who had waited for many years to finally have a baby, Tim was precious to them. Hence, before he was born, both of them promised each other that they would give Tim only the very best and love him with all their hearts.*

*When Tim came to church and Sabbath School, his parents would put him in a stroller or carry him around even though he was quite capable of walking on his own. The bottom of his shoes were always clean because he never walked. He had a definite dislike for dirt and so preferred to sit*

*in his stroller. If he wanted to go somewhere, he would ask to be carried there by his parents. His parents were always fearful that he would get hurt or that he would be unhappy. They worried lest he be unsafe or make a mistake that would be harmful.*

*Years later as an adult, Tim was happy to continue to live with his parents even though he had finished college. He had no motivation to venture out to the world of work for fear that he would be mistreated. Home was a comfortable cocoon for him. His parents were happy to have him around.*

**Some consequences of over-protection.** *Debrief the small groups. Discuss the effects of over-protection on children. You may have additional illustrations you can share as you highlight the following points:*

- Over-protection bruises the spirit of the children.
- Over-protection keeps children from growing into strong, independent adults.
- Over-protection produces children who are incapable of earning trust.
- Over-protection produces children who are incapable of making good decisions.
- Over-protection hinders children from learning from mistakes. (Clinton & Sibcey, 2006, p. 9).

**The “Army Sergeant” parent (over-control).** The army sergeant parent runs the family as a strict disciplinarian—setting rules and regulations, barking out commands, and keeping kids in line. Children often grow up in fear. They get the feeling that grownups are bullies. One of the negative effects of this parental behavior is its impact on a child’s sense of self. One of the greatest tragedies in parenting is when children grow up thinking to themselves:

- I’m bad.
- Nobody likes me.
- I don’t belong.
- I’m not all that important.
- I’m not good enough. (Toh, 2009, p. 5)

Commanding and interrogating are typical parental behaviors of the Army Sergeant parent. Someone has said that some children are bombarded with about 1200 commands or interrogatory questions every day that have the effect of over-controlling the child. For example:

- “Jim, it’s time to get up.”
- “Don’t forget to brush your teeth.”
- “Did you wash your face?”
- “Finish your vegetables.”
- “Where are your books?”
- “Where’d you leave your coat?”

**Class exercise.** *Some participants will no doubt be familiar with this style of parenting. Invite participants to provide additional commands or interrogatory statements that they can think of. Then ask, What is the effect of this type of parenting on children? Conclude with the following points.*

Overcontrolling behavior on the part of parents often:

- Leads to rebellion, anger, and emotional withdrawal.
- Creates unnecessary battles with kids.
- Trains kids to believe that personal success comes only through achievement and perfectionism.
- May cause kids to numb their emotions by turning to substance abuse and other forms of addictions. (Clinton & Sibcy, 2006, p. 52)

**Some consequences of over-control.**

- Children have problems with intimacy and relationships.
- They blame themselves for everything.
- They pretend to comply or become passive aggressive.
- They worry too much about what other people will think.
- They have trouble relaxing or having fun. (Clinton & Sibcy, 2006, pp. 53-55)

**The “Disney Daddy/Mommy Syndrome” (over-indulgence).** While “disneyland dad” is an urban dictionary term for a divorced dad who treats his kids like they are on the ultimate vacation when they are with him, over-indulging dads and moms say yes to everything their children ask for— toys, clothes, even privileges. We call this the “Disney Daddy/Mommy Syndrome.” Attempting to shower their kids with happiness and security, these parents set no limits. Children grow up unable to face disappointments in life.

**Small group exercise.** *Discuss the story of Sam below. What are the evidences of over-indulgence?*

*Sam*

*Sam is an example of an overindulged child. He came from a reasonably wealthy home where the parents were both professionals and his father was a successful businessman. From a very young age, Sam always got whatever he wanted—toys, gadgets, books, even art. He grew up well-provided for. In his late teenage years, he would spend thousands of dollars—on the spur of the moment—on a piece of artwork that he fancied. His parents provided him with all that he wanted and more.*

*Growing up in this kind of environment, Sam found it difficult whenever he did not get his way, or when he was faced with any kind of rejection. So, when his girlfriend whom he deeply loved for 3 years ended the relationship, he lacked the skills to deal with his emotions. Tragically, he committed suicide.*

**Some consequences of over-indulgence.** The Bible warns against overindulging children in Proverbs 19:18: “Discipline your children while you still have the chance; indulging them destroys them” (*The Message*). Overindulged children often turn out to have the following characteristics:

- Very selfish.
- Little sense of accomplishment.
- Lack self-control.
- A sense of entitlement.
- Impulsive and immature. (Clinton & Sibcy, 2006, pp. 46-49)

Giving children everything they want does not prepare them to be mature responsible adults. Over-indulging, sometimes called “spoiling,” children often leads to the children becoming discontented, dissatisfied, and greedy. They become addicted to “the cult of the next thing”; as they receive more, they want more. With each new toy or liberty, the newness wears off more and more quickly.

Indulged children tend to dislike anything that causes them inconvenience, so they will find household chores “boring,” or even refuse to do them. They become cross when they are denied their own way. If parents “put their foot down,” i.e., are insistent and take a firm stand, the children may collapse to the floor in a tantrum-induced heap or some other behavior whereby they attempt to exercise control over their parents. Soon these parents become frustrated, angry, and resentful that their kids have become so spoiled. Even then, very often parents still cannot say no. It’s the only way they know how to give and receive love.

**Why over-indulgence?** The reasons parents over-indulge their children can be many. They may be simply repeating what they themselves experienced with their parents, or are reacting to being reared in over-controlling homes. Over-indulgence may come from guilt they feel about theirs or their child’s circumstances, about the the fact that both parents are having to work, or choosing to work, so that they are unavailable to the child. Or there may be deeper issues that stem from their own childhood—such as some rejection or deprivation that they experienced. But the dangers of overindulging are real and go much deeper than just having a “spoiled” kid.

**Importance of balance.** Children need structure and responsibility in their lives. Without these, they can become increasingly insecure, irritable, and bored. Ellen White warns against the extremes of overhumoring children and overcontrolling them:

We hear the cry of sorrow and anguish from fathers and mothers who bewail the conduct of their children, little realizing that they are bringing this sorrow and anguish upon themselves, and ruining their children, by their mistaken affection. They do not realize their God-given responsibilities to train their children to right habits from their babyhood. . . . Many neglect their duty during the first years of their children's lives, thinking that when they get older they will then be very careful to repress wrong and educate them in the right. But the very time for them to do this work is when the children are babes in their arms. It is not right for parents to pet and humor their children; neither is it right for them to abuse them. A firm, decided straightforward course of action will be productive of the best results (White, 1948, p. 313).

The mother should not allow her child to gain an advantage over her in a single instance; and, in order to maintain this authority, it is not necessary to resort to harsh measures; a firm, steady hand and a kindness which convinces the child of your love will accomplish the purpose (White, 1954, p. 83).

**What research shows: The 4-H study of Positive Youth Development.** This research was sponsored by the National 4-H Council (a youth organization in the United States that promotes the wholistic development of youth (head, heart, hand and health). It is the first-ever longitudinal study (repeated observation over several years) to measure the characteristics of positive youth development. Begun in 2001 and led by Richard M. Lerner, Ph.D., professor at Tufts University in Massachusetts, the study used eight “waves” of research over several years until 2010. More than

4,000 youth and 2,000 parents from 25 states were studied. The study measured the impact that personal and social factors have on a young person's development. According to Dr. Lerner, three things are necessary for young people to thrive:

Every child needs first to develop high-quality, long-term relationships with caring, competent adults, like parents, teachers, coaches or mentors; second, opportunities to learn leadership and life skills by participating in structured out-of-school-time programs like 4-H; and third, the chance to take the lead in using these skills in valued community activities. If parents build these three elements into their children's lives, the children will grow into healthy, productive young people. (Ten Tips for Raising Happier, Healthier Teens, retrieved April 12, 2010)

Children who grow into healthy teens and adults enjoy the connections with their parents, relatives, as well as other significant adults such as teachers, church leaders and other mentors. The sense of being loved and cared for is a very essential element in the healthy development of our children. Parents who are involved with their children, being physically present in the home at key times of the day to share important moments—such as in the morning, after dinner and at bedtime—strengthen the bond with their kids.

## Connectedness

**It's all about connectedness!** As we begin to look at the topic of connection and connectedness, we confront a deep need that every human being has. The satisfying of this need is seriously threatened today. By "connectedness" we refer to the awareness that there are other people of importance in the *family chain of generations and relationships*. There are links to the past, to the future, and laterally to the people who share the same roots and the same values. At a wider level, connectedness refers to the sense that the generations of a given community have importance to each other, that there is a common glue that holds the social fabric together.

Connectedness requires a commitment of time and effort. It requires the willingness to "stick with it," to maintain connection even when it is difficult. It also calls for the skills to confront the negative feelings that will inevitably arise when we get close to another person.

**Small group exercise.** *Distribute Handout #1 Practical Tips on Staying Connected. Invite small groups of participants to discuss the list together, remembering times when they felt these tips helped strengthen family bonds. How can they implement other aspects of the list that may be new to them?*

### **Practical tips on staying connected.**

- Give family time top priority.
- Plan quality time together.
- Be encouraging; talk positively; express your love and concern.
- Face your problems together as a family. Facing pain enhances connectedness.
- Make happy memories; let family rituals unite and build connections.
  - Get to know each other in new ways. Share feelings, stories of the past, dreams for the future.
- Share your life experiences with your child, even those that are not so good. Be open to ask your child for help when you can.

- Support your child’s interests and hobbies without taking over. Be happy to let go and let him develop his skills without managing every detail or trying to find vicarious fulfillment where you have missed out as a child.
- Get involved in causes and altruistic activities as a family in reaching out to your neighbors and community.

### **Good News: Unconditional Love Can Bridge the Gap**

The majority of parents today want to do the right thing and perhaps are even more committed to parenting than past generations. They are eager to learn and practice the best principles to enable them to rear their children successfully. Can today’s parents bridge the love gap? Can we bring together our best intentions and actual reality—perhaps not perfectly but as close to perfect as we can make it? The answer is YES!

Yes, the bridge across the love gap is our connections—husband with wife, parents with children; connecting with grandparents and on and on wherever the links lead us. If we were to call the bridge by a name, I would call it *unconditional love*, the kind that Jesus demonstrated.

**What is unconditional love?** Sadly enough, most people don’t feel unconditionally loved. Typically, love bears a price tag. In other words, as a child I must do something you as an adult like in order for you to love me. If I please you, you will love me; if I don’t do what you like or want, you will cut me out of your love.

Unconditional love and unconditional loving is described in the Bible. It means loving no matter what; in spite of what you do, I still love you. It means loving despite all the defects and mistakes you make. It means love without demanding anything in return. It means being forgiving and having the ability to forget the wrongs done.

My beloved friends, let us continue to love each other since love comes from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God. The person who refuses to love doesn’t know the first thing about God, because God is love—so you can’t know him if you don’t love. This is how God showed his love for us: God sent his only Son into the world so we might live through him. This is the kind of love we are talking about—not that we once upon a time loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to clear away our sins and the damage they’ve done to our relationship with God (1 John 4:7-10 *The Message*).

Unconditional love means loving even those who don’t love us. Notice these words of Jesus:

You’re familiar with the old written law, “Love your friend,” and its unwritten companion, “Hate your enemy.” I’m challenging that. I’m telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty (Matthew 5:43-45 *The Message*).

A parenting coach, Kenny Toh, thinks that “the epitome of a parent’s love for his or her child is unconditional acceptance” (Toh, 2010, p. 40). A child who knows he or she is loved

unconditionally is free to be himself or herself, warts and all; there's no need to wear a mask or put on an act. The child can be genuine and comfortable with himself or herself.

**Qualities of unconditional love.** *Distribute Handout #2 Qualities of Unconditional Love. Suggest that parents take notes on each of the following points. Invite the class to make comments, or share anecdotes or illustrations of the various points that come to their minds as you share what unconditional love is like.*

- *Unconditional love is objective.* It has the ability to separate the person from the behavior. While we may disapprove of their behaviors, we need to send the message that they are still loved as persons of worth.
- *Unconditional love recognizes responsibility for consequences.* While children have the right to behave the way they choose to, that freedom comes with responsibility of facing the consequences of their actions. Unconditional love will acknowledge this freedom but will love the child through the consequences even if they are embarrassing or unpleasant.
- A teenage girl who chooses to dabble in premarital sex has to face the consequence of an unwanted pregnancy. Parents who show unconditional love will stand by her, assist her in facing the difficult process of carrying a child, dropping out of school and understanding her responsibilities toward a child who may not have a father figure and the challenge of providing for this child as a single parent.
- *Unconditional love focuses on the well-being of the children, their strengths, their personal choices in career development, etc.* Parents will acknowledge the validity of their children's inner thoughts, feelings and inclinations without imposing their desires on the child. Particularly is this so as children grow into teenagers and begin to lean towards certain career choices. Instead of seeking vicarious fulfillment through their children's careers, parents will let go and allow their kids the freedom to choose their own fields of development.
- *Unconditional love seeks divine wisdom to know when to stand firm and when to be flexible and let go.* It seeks a balance between overcontrolling and overindulging. When we go to either of these extremes, trying to convince ourselves that this way or that way is true loving, then we are in danger of fulfilling what the scriptures say in Proverbs 14:12: "There is a way that seems right to a man but its end is the way of death." Unconditional love avoids these extremes and seeks balance.
- *Unconditional love is a divine principle that, when integrated into family relationships, will result in the "abundant life" that John 10:10 speaks about.* Parents will be able to love their children in a way that the children feel truly accepted. They will exhibit a confidence in the way they can freely express their uniqueness. In this way, children and parents can channel their whole energy into actualizing their full potential instead of wasting it on feelings of anxiety, insecurity and incompleteness. In this way the love gap be bridged effectively.

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## **Practical Tips on Staying Connected**

- Plan quality time together.
- Give family time top priority.
- Be encouraging; talk positively; express your love and concern.
- Face your problems together as a family. Facing pain enhances connectedness.
- Make happy memories; let family rituals unite and build connections.
- Get to know each other in new ways. Share:
  - feelings
  - stories of the past
  - dreams for the future
- Share your life experiences with your child, even those that are not so good. Be open to ask your child for help when you can.
- Support your child's interests and hobbies without taking over. Be happy to let go and let him develop his skills without managing every detail or trying to find vicarious fulfillment where you have missed out as a child.
- Get involved in causes and altruistic activities as a family in reaching out to your neighbors and community.

## **Qualities of Unconditional Love**

- Unconditional love is objective.
  
- Unconditional love recognizes responsibility for consequences.
  
- Unconditional love focuses on the well-being of the children, their strengths, their personal choices in career development, etc.
  
- Unconditional love seeks divine wisdom to know when to stand firm and when to be flexible and let go.
  
- Unconditional love is a divine principle that, when integrated into family relationships, will result in the “abundant life” of John 10:10.

# *From the Window Ledge*

by Karen and Ron Flowers, General Conference Family Ministries Directors Emeriti  
with Ivan Góes and Roger Dudley

*A program of dialogue for parents and church folk who care passionately about the spiritual well-being of children and youth*

## **Introduction**

The educators whose experience and research inspired this seminar know what they are talking about when it comes to understanding Adventist youth. When this seminar\* was prepared, Ivan Góes, now Education Director, West Central Brazil Union, was serving as the Education and Family Ministries Director for the Northeast Brazil Union. In daily contact with young people at home and in his ministry, they keep him in close touch with their world, and he is passionately concerned for their spiritual well-being. He finds in the New Testament story of Eutychus (Acts 20:7-12) a springboard for contemplating the real-life experience and perspectives of today's youth and the challenges facing parents, teachers, youth leaders, and the church at large if we are to hold our young people close to the church for a lifetime.

Roger Dudley, now retired, served many years as the director of the Institute of Church Ministry at Andrews University. The stories that have eaten their way into his heart are the stories of young Adventists of the post-modern era, many of whom struggle to find meaning and fulfillment in the church of their childhood. For more than 10 years he traced the lives of 1,500 teenagers as they moved through the transition periods of adolescence and young adulthood, often growing disillusioned with the Adventist church. His book, *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church* (2000), chronicles in their own words the journey he and these young people took together.

Goes' and Dudley's reports from the front lines and their reflections on what they have seen and heard raise significant issues which must be urgently addressed by parents, teachers, church leaders, and other caring adults if the church is to be perceived as relevant and inviting to this generation. We must confront ourselves with the hard questions: Are we willing to listen carefully to youthful voices? Are we really hearing what they are telling us about why they leave, why they stay, and why working for change is for so many discouraging and hard? What are the implications of their perceptions for the way we do church? What will we actually do with what they have said, now that they have cared enough to risk speaking from the heart? How can we share Christ and the principles of His kingdom in language and action that they find winsome? Grappling with these issues is what this seminar is all about.

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\*This seminar was inspired by a devotional presented by Ivan Goes and *Why Teenagers Leave the Church: Personal Stories from a 10-year Study* by Roger Dudley, Review and Herald, 2000. Used by permission.

## About These Seminar Materials

The seminar is presented in four parts:

- Part I - The Story of Eutychus through Contemporary Eyes
- Part II - Facing the Numbers
- Part III - In Their Own Voices
- Part IV - Why Adventist Teenagers Stay in the Church

Each part has a presentation followed by group discussion. The seminar parts are designed to flow together in sequence. Approximate time for the seminar: 1½ to 2 hours. Be sure to provide sufficient quantities of Handout 1 • *Why Adventist Youth Leave the Church: In Their Own Voices* (used in Part III) and Handout 2 • *What My Church Did Right* (used in Part IV).

## Part I - The Story of Eutychus through Contemporary Eyes

*A simple reading of the story of the young lad Eutychus in Acts 20:7-12, or the dramatization of this story through contemporary eyes as in the skit below, can be used to create the setting for this dialogue among parents and other adults who care passionately about the spiritual well-being of children and youth. Very simple props can be used, or word pictures painted, to help the participants visualize the scenes in their minds. The cast for the skit are:*

Eutychus—a typical teenager in the church  
 Lydia—Eutychus’ mother  
 Theo—Eutychus’ father, head elder in the church at Troas  
 Chloe, Ty, and Lois—Teenagers in Eutychus’ cohort  
 Town folk—people doing business in the village square  
 Church folk—members of the Troas Christian Church  
 Paul—an apostle of our Lord Jesus Christ

### Scene 1

*The home of Lydia and Theo (pronounced Tay-oh) and their son Eutychus. Lydia is in the kitchen preparing dinner and Eutychus is doing homework in the next room when Theo comes in excitedly from work.*

Theo: Guess what Lydia! I just found out that our beloved friend, Paul, is here—in Troas! I bumped into Timothy and a couple other men who have been traveling with him in the market. He just arrived this morning.

Lydia: Oh, that’s wonderful! I have missed him and the others so much. Somehow the church just seems stronger, more vibrant, when they’re here. And the preaching! Oh, how I have missed Paul’s preaching!

Theo: *(Starting to set the table as Lydia continues meal preparations.)* And why is it that the troublemakers all show themselves after he leaves?

Lydia: Hmmph! They never would have had the courage to confront Paul!

- Theo: I do wish Paul had more time for counsel. There are several serious matters that I wish he could settle once and for all! But I hear he may only be around for a week or so. Anyway, we're trying to organize a big meeting for all the believers in this region on Sunday night.
- Eutyclus: (*Calling from the adjoining room, sounding frustrated.*) Does this mean the youth campout is off for this weekend?
- Lydia: (*Trying to be understanding.*) Eutyclus, you can always go camping. We don't always have Paul with us!
- Eutyclus: Well, his timing is really great! (*Heaving a long heavy sigh.*) And I suppose you'll make me go to this meeting too!
- Theo: Of course. How would it look with me there as the head elder of the congregation and my family not present? (*In disbelief.*) What's wrong with you? Believers will walk miles to hear this!
- Eutyclus: But Paul's sermons are so long! Just when you think he's winding down, he thinks of another 20 points he just has to make. And then he wants to sing all nine verses of the closing hymn! Oh, why does he have to turn up on the weekend we were going camping!
- Theo: That'll be enough criticism of God's anointed from you, young man. And see to it that you get a haircut before the weekend too. (*Theo turns his full attention back to his wife.*) Now, Lydia. Do you think we could have something to eat for Paul and all the leaders of the church at our house after the meeting? That may be the only time we have to ask the questions we need his guidance on. . . .

## Scene 2

*Sunday evening, the balcony of the Troas Christian Church. Eutyclus and his teenage cohort are sitting in a row, chatting animatedly amidst the din of meeting preparations.*

- Eutyclus: What a bummer! We should be sitting around a campfire about now!
- Ty: You got that right! I still can't believe that out of all the weekends in the year, old Paul had to pick this one to turn up in Troas!
- Chloe: If you ask me, I'd have been better off if he'd never shown up in Troas at all. Ever since my folks joined this church, I've been nothing but restricted! Can't wear this, can't go there, can't do that, can't listen to my music . . . .
- Eutyclus: Some of the rules don't seem to make much sense. It's like the church majors in minors. But I could deal with the rules and stuff if church just wasn't so boring. All we ever do is sit. They don't seem to need us for anything.
- Lois: Yeah, well, look on the bright side. If it wasn't for church, we wouldn't be friends.

- Eutyclus: True. And this place does have the best potlucks! Remember that rice dish Anna's mother made last time? It was awesome. I think I had thirds!
- Ty: Eutyclus, man, all you think about is your stomach. (*Eutyclus just rolls his eyes.*)
- Chloe: That was the potluck when none of you bothered to save me a seat! (*She pretends to be upset with them for a brief moment, then goes on talking.*) Well, the only seat left was with this bunch of old ladies. I didn't think they could get two brain cells to work together, but it was the most amazing thing. They were genuinely interested in me! They wanted to know how school was going, and whether I had thought yet about college and what I want to do with my life. . . . The next week one of them even came up to me in the hall and called me by name and said she'd looked up on the Internet and discovered that the University of Reading has a really good International Relations program. I still can't get over it that she remembered my name and what I'm interested in! And who would have guessed she even knew how to get on the Internet!
- Lois: Hey, speaking of potlucks, did anyone see Christy last Sabbath? She usually stays for lunch if she's here.
- Chloe: Come to think of it, I haven't seen her in several weeks. It doesn't surprise me really. Since her dad lost his job, she has to buy her own clothes and pay some on her tuition, so she's really working hard these days. She got a second job as a receptionist at a nursing home. She works the night shift after going to school all day. She told me last week she was looking for a church that met in the afternoon so she could get some rest on Sabbath. At first I laughed. That idea has about as much chance of being heard as I have of getting an "A" in French class! But she has a point.
- Eutyclus: Maybe she and I could start our own church. I asked my mom once if they had ever considered starting Sabbath school even a half an hour later, like maybe at 10 o'clock or something. She looked at me like I was a lazy rascal. She just doesn't get it that I need a weekend after a long hard week of school work. I need to relax. I need time with my friends. And I have a lot of stuff I need to do too. When church takes up Friday night and my whole Saturday, when am I supposed to get any rest? And why is it that everything that's happening in this town happens on Saturday!
- Chloe: Hey, are we invited over to your place tonight whenever this gets over? Come on, Euty, give me something to look forward to!
- Eutyclus: Sorry guys. My mom's invited Paul and all the leaders of the church to discuss big problems.
- Chloe: Yeah, like what to do with kids who lower the standards and ask hard questions! Hey, I just thought of something. (*She smiles broadly.*) You know what this church needs? A really good band!

- Ty: Sh-h-h, be quiet. They're about to pray. *(The teens pause and bow their heads as though in prayer. Eutyclus opens his eyes and peeks over at Chloe, catches her eye, and grins. A few seconds later, they resume talking in whispers.)*
- Eutyclus: Hey, any bets on how long Paul preaches? I clocked him at 1 hour, 47 minutes the last time! Well, you see that open window over there? I'm going to go sit in it. There's a lot going on in town tonight, and I'm hoping to get another look at that new girl that just moved here from Abydos *(He raises his eyebrows, whistles low under his breath, and makes a face to convey that he thinks she's a knockout.)* At least I won't have you guys elbowing me when Paul gets so deep in his theology that I go off to sleep! Besides, it's stuffy in here . . . .
- Ty: Watch that you don't fall asleep . . . and out! *(Eutyclus walks away, pretending not to hear, while his friends try to control their laughter.)*

### Scene 3

*The village street below the window. Eutyclus lies motionless on the ground. A cluster of town folk gather around him, looking very worried.*

- Town folk 1: It's bad. He took a terrible fall. He fell out of that window like a dead weight.
- Town folk 2: And it looks like that's just what he is all right. Dead! And so young, too. Did someone go for the doctor?
- Town folk 3: *(Bending down to check whether he is breathing or not.)* Well, here, let me see if he's breathing. . . . I'm not getting a pulse.
- Ty: *(Eutyclus' teenage friends rush in on the scene.)* Didn't I give him specific instructions not to fall out!
- Lois: Just tell me. Is he going to be okay? I can't bear to look.
- Chloe: *(Praying aloud.)* Oh God, if you're up there, please don't let Eutyclus die!
- Church folk 1: *(Church folk arriving on the scene.)* You might know it would be Eutyclus! That boy is going to be the death of his parents yet!
- Church folk 2: I know he's a bit of a rebel, but he's really a good kid at heart. He's always cheering people up and there aren't very many boys who hang around to help clean up after potluck. I tell him he's an angel! I know he didn't mean to fall out of the window. It had to be an accident. Oh dear, I will miss him so much. And his poor parents!
- Church folk 3: Well, I don't know. Wherever there are kids, there's trouble. They're always questioning things, challenging things, wanting to change things. I find it really quite upsetting! Why can't they just trust their elders?
- Paul: *(Paul pushes the crowd aside to get to the boy. He drops immediately over him, wrapping his arms around him and pulling him close to his breast. Paul's eyes are*

*closed, as if in earnest prayer. After a few seconds, he opens his eyes, lifts his face toward heaven, and shouts with joy.) Thank you, Jesus! (Turning to the crowd.) Don't be alarmed! He's alive! Come, let's praise God and break bread together and testify of His marvelous grace! This boy who was dead is alive! This is reason to celebrate!*

**Small group discussion.** *Picture Eutychus perched in the window sill. Open to his view is the full panorama of both the world outside and the church inside. What do you think Eutychus sees? What makes the world outside so eye-catching, then and now? Think about the dialogue among the cast in the first two scenes of the drama. What comments ring in your ears and speak volumes about the teens' perceptions of life as a young person in the Troas congregation? What do you think there is about being raised in a Christian home and in the church that will draw Eutychus' attention inside the window? Do you think it will ultimately be enough to disciple Eutychus for Christ and to hold him in the church as a young adult? What's enticing the young people in your family and your home church inside?*

## Part II - Facing the Numbers

Statistical research on Adventist youth and their involvement with the church presents a sobering reality. As a way to experience the statistics given below more powerfully, invite participants to “number off” taking a number from 1 to 10, repeating as many times as is necessary until everyone is numbered. When statistics are given, ask the appropriate proportion of participants to stand to represent the percentage of young people who said “yes” in response to a given item on the survey questionnaire. For example, when you report the statistic that 40-50% of young people in NAD are leaving the church by their middle 20's, ask participants with numbers 1-5 (i.e., half the participants) to stand. For the 34% who report they attend Sabbath school, you might ask participants with the numbers 8-10 to stand, representing approximately one-third of the group. This will give the group with higher numbers opportunity to participate.

From Dudley's research, “it seems reasonable to believe that at least 40 percent to 50 percent of Seventh-day Adventist teenagers in North America are essentially leaving the church by their middle 20s. This figure may well be higher. Some will return eventually (perhaps a fifth of the dropouts), but, of course, more may also leave” (Dudley, 2000, p. 35). Some additional vital statistics:

Attendance at worship	55%
Attendance at Sabbath School	34%
Attendance at other kinds of meetings	25%
Hold church office	21%
Serve on committees	13%
Participate in share-your-faith activities	21%
Personal daily prayer	59%
(an additional 23% report weekly or oftener)	
Personal daily Bible study	13%
(an additional 30% report weekly or oftener)	
Participate daily in family worship	12%
(an additional 17% report weekly or oftener)	
Say religious faith is quite/very important	82%
Feel accepted by members of local church	74%

Feel they have equal input into church operation	56%
Feel their mother is a positive influence in their spiritual development	80%
Feel their father is a positive influence	62%
Feel other adults in the church are a positive influence	32%
Listen to rock music at least several times a week	59%
Attend the cinema at least every month	52%
Drink alcoholic beverages at least every month	21%
Are sexually active with no plans for marriage	14%

A lot of credit is due those who have had the courage to face the statistics, to find out and acknowledge the real numbers representing Adventist youth and life as they live it on both sides of the back door of the church. It is not always easy to face the truth. But it is an important first step toward a positive solution to a world-church challenge.

**Small group discussion.** *How do you think the numbers for your local region and congregation would compare with Dr. Dudley's statistics?*

### **Part III - In Their Own Voices**

For this part of the seminar, distribute Handout 1 • Why Adventist Youth Leave the Church: In Their Own Voices. This resource has been compiled from comments and letters of 1,500 teenagers and young adults who responded to Roger Dudley's 10-year longitudinal study of Adventist youth for the North American Division. These comments are a representative sampling of their actual words in answer to questions as to why they leave the church and things in the church that they find most disturbing.

In advance of the seminar, organize a small voice choir of adult volunteers to present this collage of youthful voices speaking about their church. Your voice choir will need to practice in order for the comments to flow smoothly and with feeling. You may want to put the scripts for the readers in folders so they will distract as little as possible. Ask them to read with deep feeling, as though they had taken on the identity of the young person. When the voice choir presents their reading, consider having them cluster closely together, as in a family portrait. You may wish to elevate the readers to different heights by standing some on covered boxes, putting others in various heights of chairs and stools. Something as simple as your arrangement of people can generate curiosity and heighten the impact of the words.

**Small group discussion.** *What comments stirred the greatest response in you? Talk about the feelings and heart cries you hear from behind the words. Ask yourselves: Is there even one young person from our congregation, our part of the world, who might have written this comment? On what basis might they have come to these conclusions? What are the key reasons you hear the young people saying that they are leaving the church? If you were seated in the same room with these young people, what would be your response? How will you put "practical legs" on your response in your local church?*

## Part IV - Why Adventist Teenagers Stay in the Church

Ask a spiritually mature young adult from your congregation to read Handout 2 • What My Church Did Right. If you have the courage, you may want to ask your youth group to write personal essays for you on what your church is doing right, and where they would like to see themselves be part of effecting change. Do not consider this option unless you really plan to include them and their ideas in dialogue and church planning. Sharing their comments at this point in the seminar would likely give the group plenty to think about.

**Small group discussion.** *How closely does this description compare with your local church? What would it take to make your church more like this? How much urgency do you feel about growing in this direction, knowing that whether or not your kids stay in the church may well depend on it? How will you translate this sense of urgency into action?*

### Closure

One Adventist young person who has not yet given up on effecting change in the church for her generation gives us hope: “Adventists are people; many follow the way of God fairly well; others just need time to grow up and receive teaching from the Master. At least they’ve come to the right place” (Dudley, 2000. p. 180).

Roger Dudley concludes: “It’s up to all of us to make sure that it is the right place” (p.180).

**Closing exercise.** *Give each participant a piece of paper and a few minutes to write down the names of as many children, youth and young adults as they can who are connected in any way to your congregation. Ask each person to bring their paper to the front and place it in a basket next to a large Bible that you have placed there. Take a few minutes to vision together what it will take to make your church “the right place” for the lifelong disciple-making of these precious ones entrusted to your care. Then take time to pray for them, for their friends, for their parents, for the entire community of faith as you commit yourselves anew to nurturing them and growing together with them toward unity in Christ.*

### References

Dudley, R. (2000). *Why our teenagers leave the church*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing.

### **Why Adventist Youth Leave the Church: In Their Own Voices**

- Reader 1: Sitting in a church pew, surrounded by people, feels more lonely than sitting in a park playing solitaire.
- Reader 2: There is so much I want to know about God, but I never find any of it out at church.
- Reader 3: I feel unaccepted by church members. I get more out of religious discussions with my friends than I do out of church.
- Reader 4: I would rather spend Sabbath on my own than try to carve out a place in the ice.
- Reader 5: I work nights, and it is very difficult to get up early enough to go to church. Why can't there be an afternoon service?
- Reader 6: People are not accepted if they don't meet the dress codes or follow the rules.
- Reader 7: Members are eager to judge by outward appearances and don't even bother to get to know someone inside.
- Reader 8: There is no love. It is all talk.
- Reader 1: They teach us one way, and in so many cases don't abide by their own teaching.
- Reader 3: People look down their noses to discover all the bad, negative qualities about others and pretend that they alone are doing God's will.
- Reader 2: A lot of members are "people-watching" instead of "Jesus-watching."
- Reader 4: I was greatly discouraged with how supposed "Christians" could be so rude, unaccepting, and cruel.
- Reader 5: The level of control that the church tries to wield over an individual's life disturbs me.
- Reader 7: I'm disturbed by the tendency toward a judgmental response to anything new and different; toward anything that makes people think about why they believe the way they do.
- Reader 6: Staying spiritually alive is difficult. The church is full of gray heads—wise, needed parts of the body of Christ. But why must they be so stuffy and pharisaical, insisting the young people worship in the same silent, slow, sleepy way they do?
- Reader 8: Jesus came and encouraged freedom and joy in our praise and worship. He shook the traditionalists to the core. I believe our youth can bring back that revival of energy and freedom in our programs.

- Reader 4: Too long we have been stifled by the opinion that in order to be truly godly you must dress backwards to fashion and worship God *only* in slow hymns and organ music.
- Reader 2: In desperation, I reach out to other denominations to feed me spiritually. Then I can go back and encourage and build up my own church. “You shouldn’t do that,” someone said. “It makes it look like we don’t feed you.” “You don’t” was my quiet, honest answer.
- Reader 3: The nominating committee decided to inject a mixture of older people, youth, and women into the leadership positions. The older clique was infuriated. I had supported them for years, and when they had an opportunity to support me, they basically thought I wasn’t ready to be so active.
- Reader 1: I wish so badly I could find enthusiasm. But it’s very difficult to want to be involved when our ideas and opinions are considered to be too radical and not important.
- Reader 8: Everyone tells us that we are the church of tomorrow, but I and millions of others are trying to tell you and everyone else who will listen that *there will be no church of tomorrow* if we are not recognized and accepted *as we are*, and allowed to put our youthful energy and new ideas into effect.
- Reader 6: Much of Adventism seems to be rules, rules, rules. If it is fun, then it must be BAD! Let us not snuff out joy wherever we go. Being a Christian should not be depressing. The God I know is not like that at all!
- Reader 7: The church focuses so much on “should’s” and rules and theology, but not enough on actions, such as working in the community and accepting those who don’t fit into the narrow box the church feels they should.
- Reader 4: I need to hear about Jesus. I need to hear that He loves me. I need to hear someone remind me how He showed me His love. So I’ve found other places to go; places that weren’t distracted by someone else’s writings or other churches’ teachings. They told me only about my Lord, His sacrifice and His love, and what it means to me.

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Dudley, R. L. (2000). *Why our teenagers leave the church: Personal stories from a 10-year study*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald. Used by permission.

## **What My Church Did Right One of Your Former Kids Just Wants to Write and Say “Thanks.”**

By Becky Lane Scoggins

At one time I believed that all churches were brimming with old people and young people who not only loved each other, but even liked each other. I imagined that all pastors played baseball and told campfire stories; that potlucks were significant events on everyone’s social calendar.

That was more than 12 years ago. Do you remember the day I became an “official” part of you? I’ll never forget it.

It was summer, of course. Because the church didn’t have a baptistry, we had to wait until the Minnesota lakes were free of ice. All the church members drove over to Charlotte Johnson’s home on Bass Lake. My friend Jennifer and I giggled as we struggled into the black baptismal robes, several sizes too big. We felt nervous, because we knew you were all so proud of us; and sober, because we knew it was the beginning of something important. We loved Jesus very much that day.

We saw you beaming as we tripped down the grassy bank in our robes. Everyone sang “Trust and Obey” from yellow song sheets that flapped in the breeze. Mom’s camera ran out of film, and the neighbour kids abandoned their floating inner tube and climbed out on the boat dock to watch. Uncle Wilber led us through the green lily pads and quoted from Ecclesiastes 12, about remembering the Creator in the days of our youth; then he baptized us.

The elders lined up to shake our hands and solemnly welcomed us into the Blackberry church. Grandma kept saying how beautiful it was that three ducks swam by just as we were baptized. I shook my long, wet hair and didn’t say anything. I knew that you loved me.

The pastor gave me a baptismal certificate that day, but what I remember even more came a few weeks later.

### **Thanks for a Place to Work**

The phone rang one evening. It was someone from the nominating committee, asking if I would be the Sabbath school secretary. Each week for the next year I picked up offering envelopes, counted the change two or three times (to make sure it was right), and recorded it in my logbook. My sixth-grade classmates served as cradle roll teachers, junior deacons, and members of the social committee. We never doubted that our church needed us.

You found out by default what surveys were just beginning to prove: youth don’t want entertainment; they want something to do. So you gave us something to do, expected us to do it, and we did it. We knew you trusted us.

When you asked me to be the church communication secretary in seventh grade, you didn’t laugh as I earnestly marched to the local *Herald Review* with my handwritten news releases. You asked us to read mission stories when we couldn’t even pronounce the names of all the countries. You listened eagerly to our first sermons—long before we had ever heard of homiletics.

Somehow you understood that youth want more than a voice in the church's back seat—we want a hand on the steering wheel and a foot on the accelerator. Yes, we've probably caused a few crashes, but at least a church doesn't need collision insurance. We all survived, and we youth knew we were a necessary part of the team.

### **Thanks for a Place to Grow**

But now you're wondering if we still need you. You've heard all the talk about youth leaving the church. You've heard that we have a long list of complaints: that we feel shut out, left out, let down, and turned off. Are you afraid you've failed?

Sure, you may have done a few things wrong, but I'm writing this letter to thank you, the Blackberry church, for *not* failing us. Thank you for doing a lot of things right.

Thank you for your time. There were many things your small church couldn't give—youth pastors, fancy Pathfinder uniforms, a satellite hookup in church. But you gave us your time. You gave your Friday evenings to plan to our Sabbath school lessons. You camped in igloos in February, watched the slides (164 of them) from my Maranatha mission trip, listened to the Christmas concerts we performed in, and prayed for us when you could have been sleeping.

Thank you for your adaptable spirit. True, you've all been sticking to your "family" pews for about eight decades now, but you've adjusted to youthful surprises with patience—even humor.

Remember the Pathfinder boating trip when Amy "caught" the pastor's shirt with a fishhook? She was embarrassed and afraid of his reaction. But he only laughed and suggested that we fry him for supper.

Then there was that picnic when Mom told me to bring the forks, but I forgot. No one fussed about the mistake (maybe because you looked so funny using potato chips for utensils).

I've seen you attempt some bold changes. I was proud when you were one of the first churches in the conference to ordain a woman elder. It meant a lot that you supported me when I decided to spend a year in public school instead of going to academy. And if my skirts were ever too short, you never said a word.

### **Thanks for Still Trying**

Are you wondering if you should have done anything differently while we were growing up? Are you searching for a foolproof method for reaching the younger generation? Forget it.

Are you waiting until you can really get the youth program organized? Forget that, too.

Youth ministry isn't neat, time-efficient, or organized. It's exhausting.

But I'm a Seventh-day Adventist Christian today because I discovered Jesus Christ in your church family, and I believed you needed my help to show His love to our community.

I know a youth class still meets every Sabbath morning in the same room with folding metal chairs that scrape on the green and yellow linoleum. There's probably another girl with long hair and braces who sits in my place now. I hope you give her more than a baptismal certificate and a handshake when she's baptized.

Give her a cradle roll class to teach. Give her a sermon to preach.

Let her know that you need her.

Kids hate to let people down, especially people they love. If you need them and trust them, they'll get the job done.

Love,

Becky

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## *The Twins' Answered Question*

by Idalida Nunez de Luna  
Northern Asia-Pacific Division

Twinky and her brother Peter were nine year old twins. Do you know what twins are? Yes, it means that two babies grew together inside their mommy and were born one after the other. Twins often look very much alike and are usually very close to each other. These twins had fun playing together, eating together, going to school together and doing almost everything together!

One day Twinky and Peter were seated on the steps at the front of their house, but they were not looking happy at all that afternoon. Mom and Dad had said they could not go to Rosie and Robert's house for the slumber party. Everyone in class was talking about this invitation on Saturday night. The plans for fun, the games, the movie, the food—just about everything sounded like so much fun!

Twinky said, "I never understand why Mom and Dad do not want us to have fun or why they said no when we have been invited to our friends' house? I think that is not fair." "Yes," said Peter, "I don't like it either, sometimes I would like to have a different mom and dad, ones that will let us go wherever we want to go."

This was not a happy moment in Twinky and Peter's lives. The sun was setting and the skies looked beautiful, but they didn't even notice. All they could think about was this slumber party and they could even hear the giggles, the laughter and see how much fun everyone was having.

Suddenly, they turned around when they heard mom opening the porch door. In her hands was a plate of their favorite chocolate chip cookies and two tall glasses of milk.

Mom sat close to them and said, "I can see this is not a happy moment for you guys, and we know that you would love to be with your friends at this special party, so I think it will be best to try to explain to you the reasons why we decided it is better for you not to join the party. Would you like to know?"

Rather hesitantly, they each answered, "Yeah, I guess."

"You know, when you were just little babies, we were very happy that God sent us such beautiful children and we promised God we would do everything in our power to help you to grow healthy and strong.

"One of the things which is very important for growing strong and healthy is that you sleep early and eat good, healthy food. When you go to these types of parties, we cannot guarantee that you will sleep early or that you will eat healthy, so Dad and I decided that you are so dear and precious to us, that we cannot allow you to go, even when we know you may feel disappointed about that.

"We want you to know that it is easier to make you happy and just allow you to go, but we know that if you were the parents and had to make the same decision you would choose what is best for your children too."

Twinky said in between mouthfuls of chocolate chip cookies, "Thanks, mom, for taking the time to explain things to us. When you tell us why we cannot go I guess it makes it easier to obey."

And Peter added, "Wow! We thought it was that you didn't want us to have any fun. We

didn't know it was because you loved us. It makes me feel so good to know that you love us so much that you choose what is best for us, even when you know it will disappoint us and make you look bad in our eyes."

"Yes, Peter," Mom said, "Raising kids is a big responsibility we grownups have, and we always want to do our best." Then Twinky got

up and hugged her mom adding, "And thank you for the yummy cookies too."

Remember, Moms and Dads, explanations make things easier for kids. And kids, remember, your mom and dad love you very much, even when it may not always look like it.

# *Lifesavers*

by Cheri Corder  
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Cheri hated going to the store with her mother. It seemed like such a waste of time! But EVERY WEEK, they went to the store anyway. Every week, her mother loaded Cheri and her little sister into the big green station wagon and headed for Raley's.

It seemed to Cheri that Raley's had something her mother wanted on *every* aisle. First, they would go to the row of tools. Mother loved to look at the tools because she was always making or fixing something. Every time they went to the store, they took a good long look at the tools.

On the next aisle, Raley's had towels. Cheri's family was very big, with eight kids in all, so it seemed they were always needing more towels. Towels were very boring to look at.

Cheri's mother also enjoyed giving presents, so they had to go down the treasure aisle. You know what treasures are – the pretty things that mothers liked to give away as presents, like little music boxes and figurines and collectible bells and other stuff that little kids are not supposed to touch.

Sometimes, if Cheri was really lucky, she could look at the toys. That was her favorite aisle! As long as they had to be in a store looking at something, she was glad when they could take some time to look at the toys!

One day when they were all through looking at tools, towels, treasures and toys, Cheri noticed something else in Raley's. Up by the check stand, they had rows of candy and rows

of gum and at the very bottom of the display; there was a row of Lifesavers.

Cheri *loved* lifesavers. Red ones were her favorite, and for only 5 cents (this happened a long time ago), you could buy a whole roll.

"Mommy?" she smiled very sweetly up at her mother and tugged on her skirt. "May I please have some Lifesavers?"

Mother smiled, but shook her head. "Not today," she answered, in the way mothers often do.

Cheri was disappointed. But maybe she would get some next time.

Next time, after they had seen the tools and towels and treasures and toys, Cheri again noticed the rows of candy and gum and Lifesavers.

"Mommy?" she asked in her sweetest voice. "Could I please have some Lifesavers *this* time?"

And do you know what her mother said? "Not today."

This time, Cheri was upset with that answer. She had been so patient, looking at the tools and the towels and the treasures and they'd hardly *looked* at the toys, and *still* her mother said "Not today"!

It was then that Cheri seemed to hear a little voice, talking in a very interesting way. "Why don't you just reach out and *take* some

Lifesavers? The checker isn't paying any attention. Just look around – there's nobody watching you. Your mother is busy with Little Sister in the cart. Besides, this is such a big store and the Lifesavers are so little. It really doesn't matter. Nobody will ever know. You've been such a good little girl today – you *deserve* some Lifesavers!"

So, Cheri reached out her little hand and took a roll of red Lifesavers and stuffed them deep into her pocket. Her mother pushed the cart out to the car and unloaded it, but Cheri didn't help much because she was hanging onto her pocket. They drove that big green station wagon home and her mother unloaded it and put everything away, but Cheri didn't help much because she was hanging onto her pocket.

The first minute she had a chance, she ran into the bathroom, locked the door and opened her roll of red Lifesavers. The first one tasted *so* good! The second one was OK, but she didn't enjoy the third one so much. It seemed like there was another little voice talking to her, one that she had ignored at the store, and it was saying things that bothered Cheri.

"You shouldn't have taken those Lifesavers. It doesn't matter how little they are, they don't belong to you. That was stealing, Cheri. . . . That was *stealing*."

Cheri knew this voice was right, and she began to feel badly about what she had done. In fact, the Lifesaver she was eating didn't taste so good anymore. She flushed it down the toilet and went to her bedroom, tucked the rest of the Lifesavers in her dresser drawer and lay down on her bed.

"Cheri, Honey, are you feeling all right?" her mother had come into her room and was checking her forehead.

"Oh, Mommy," she cried, and the whole story came tumbling out. Cheri's mother hugged her and stroked her hair.

"Do you know what we need to do?" Mother asked.

"Talk to Jesus?"

"Yes, let's talk to Jesus."

After they talked to Jesus, Cheri felt GREAT! They asked Him to forgive her for stealing the Lifesavers. And since Mommy had always taught her that Jesus loved her and died on the cross for her and *loved* to forgive her sins, she knew that she was all forgiven for stealing the Lifesavers. Just that quickly. Just that easily. She was ready to get on with her life!

Her mother, however, had some sobering news. Cheri was still going to have to make things right with Raley's! Now, Cheri felt sick again! But following her mother's instructions, Cheri got a nickel out of her piggy bank, and her mother drove her back to the store. Cheri was really scared. After all, she was a *thief*, and for all she knew, they were going to call the police and have her arrested!

The store manager's desk was very high and Cheri had to reach way up to put the nickel on it. But he was very nice and didn't call the police, and her mother took her back home.

Do you know something? Cheri never stole Lifesavers again! In fact, she never stole *anything* again! But there were still many times she had to pray for Jesus to forgive her. And do you know what? He always has!

Making things right has not always been as easy as taking a nickel down to Raley's. But being forgiven by Jesus IS easy – all we have to do is ask Him and He *will* forgive our sins!

**Bible verse:**

The Bible says, *“If we confess our sins, He is faithful”* (that means He always will do it) *“and just”* (that means because of dying on the cross, He has every right) *“to forgive us our sins.”* 1 John 1:9.

**Note to storytellers:**

- *This is written with the idea that children love repetition. They will enjoy the opportunity to fill in some of the*

*blanks such as “...to look at the \_\_\_\_ (tools) and \_\_\_\_ (towels) and \_\_\_\_ (treasures) and \_\_\_\_ (toys)” as well as giving the mother's answer, “Not today.”*

- *This story is obviously about stealing; making restitution, and God's forgiveness, but it is also an example of a mother being safe while giving healthy leadership and direction to her child in a teachable moment.*

## *Elena's Other Family*

by Wilma Kirk Lee, MSW, LCSW  
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North American Division

God's love provides us with family in ways we cannot imagine! Often we speak of family as mommy, daddy, sister and brother, and that is correct. However, we read in Psalms 68:6, "You find families for those who are lonely. . . ." (CEV). This means God places people who have a need for a family with those who have love to give.

There was a little girl whose name was Elena. She was only two years old and her mother became very ill and she died. Elena's father did not know what to do with his little girl, and he was very sad because he did not have a wife and Elena did not have a mother. He asked a family that he knew if they would be kind enough to keep Elena during the day while he went to work. He asked this family because they had a mommy who stayed at home with their own daughter, Melody. Melody was a little younger than Elena and Elena's daddy thought she would be a good friend for Elena.

When Elena's father asked the family if they would be willing to add another person to their lives every day, the family decided they should pray about this decision before giving an answer. Every one prayed and asked the Lord if they could be another family for Elena. They decided the answer was "yes." They called Elena's father and told him they would be happy for Elena to come to their house during the day. Elena's father was very happy to have someone who would love Elena and be kind to her since she was sad because her mommy had died.

The first day Elena came to Melody's family was very hard. Elena did not know anyone at the house and she was a very sad little girl. Melody's mommy sat with Elena and rocked in the rocking chair while she cried and cried. Elena did not want to talk or play with Melody. She wanted Mommy. She could not understand why Mommy was not at home to take care of her anymore. She was so sad. At the end of the day, she was very happy when Daddy came to pick her up.

Every day when Elena's father left her at Melody's house, Elena cried and sobbed while Melody's mommy rocked her in the rocking chair. This happened for two weeks as Elena learned to know Melody and her family. She began to understand she had two families who loved her. She became friends with Melody and they played together each day. It was fun to have someone her age to talk and share with everyday. They decided they would be "sisters" – even though they were not born in the same family.

Elena began to look forward to going to Melody's house. In the morning, she did not have to sit in the rocking chair and cry, she could smile when she saw Melody and her mommy. She and Melody would have their hair combed with the same ribbons and style so they could look alike. They tried to wear clothes that were alike, too. When they went places, they would hold hands and smile at each other because they were not alone.

One day when Elena's father came after work to pick her up, she told him she wanted to spend the night with Melody. She said, "I have

a good time with my other sister, and I want to spend the night with her.” Elena’s father was surprised to see Elena smiling and laughing and not crying to go home with him. He asked Melody’s mommy if it was all right with her to have Elena spend the night. When she said yes, he kissed Elena and told her he would see her after work on the next day. Elena and Melody giggled and talked for a long time that night before they went to sleep.

Elena learned she could have more than one family. She also learned people could love her and care for her who were not related to her. She could have another Mommy to help with things mommies do for little girls – comb hair, buy clothes and rock them when they cry. She had another sister, Melody, who loved her and shared with her. Elena learned God loved her and made sure that she would not be lonely. He put her in Melody’s family and they shared God’s love with Elena.

# *Two Things Men Need (But Won't Talk About)*

By Juan Choque, Ph.D.  
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Translated by Anabell Barrientos

Though typically they don't talk about it, all men are individuals with needs. Ultimately, every man needs God to provide for his multiple needs. From a leadership and family relations perspective, men need to have two basic needs fulfilled before they can aspire to reach new heights or carry on new enterprises: (1) they need recognition and (2) they need to be challenged.

## **Recognition**

Even though a man may often appear to be secure within, deep down in his heart it is as true of him as of women, children and youth—he needs to be recognized, valued and appreciated. Jesus Christ once told the parable of the talents. In that parable, the master affirmed the servants who had invested wisely, “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things” (Matt. 25:21). Jesus here lets us know that appropriate recognition is important. Giving recognition, though, seems strange to many. They find it really hard to recognize others.

Healthy homes are homes where this need is understood. Though some are more expert at doing it than others, all sincere Christian parents seek to provide recognition of their children as persons of value. They express this affirmation in words to their children. They know that there is no need to invest large sum of money to express gratitude. The same is true in marriage. Often a compliment expressed, or a letter, a message, a word of public recognition is sufficient. The effect of timely and sincere appreciation upon a person is incalculable.

The poignant story, “Who You Are Makes a Difference” (Canfield & Hansen, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, 1993), tells how the simple process of recognition of one person by another can make a profound difference. Helice Bridges, a California teacher, gave her students a project “to see what kind of impact recognition would have on a community” (p. 18). She made blue ribbons with the words stamped in gold “Who I Am Makes a Difference.” Giving each of her students one personally and telling them how they made a difference to her and the class, she then sent three additional ribbons with them to pin on others of their choice.

One student gave a ribbon to a man who had helped him with an assignment on career planning, then asked him to take the remaining two and pass them on. The man agreed and later approached his boss, known as a rather hard and often grouchy man. Surprised, the boss accepted the ribbon as his employee described how he admired his creative genius. Then he asked the boss, “Would you take this extra ribbon and pass it on by honoring somebody else?”

The boss took the ribbon home and told his 14-year-old son what had happened, and how he wanted to honor his son with the final ribbon. He confessed that he hadn't paid much attention to his son and often yelled at him for not getting good enough grades. But then he said, "Besides your mother, you are the most important person in my life. You're a great kid and I love you!" Listen to the impact of this recognition:

The startled boy started to sob and sob, and he couldn't stop crying. . . . He looked up at his father and said through his tears, "I was planning on committing suicide tomorrow, Dad, because I didn't think you loved me. Now I don't need to" (p. 20).

How many other men, women and young people are hungry for this kind of personal validation and recognition!! If such an expression of recognition is able to save a son and a father-son relationship, should we not also be generous in passing on recognition wherever we can? When a man completes a task, reaches a goal, achieves an academic degree or simply comes home after a hard day's work, a wise and loving word from his wife will have a huge impact on him. In this way we minister to his fundamental human need.

### **Challenge**

There is something that gets activated in men when they are challenged. Men love to have goals. They will often struggle and fight hard to reach them. A challenged man reaches for energy within that drives him forward in a great enterprise, such that later he may scarcely believe he ever tackled it. A challenged man will often throw caution to the winds and at great personal risk extend himself in extraordinary ways to meet the challenge before him.

Jesus Christ threw out the challenge of discipleship to His hearers. In Luke 14:26-33 the Master told His followers in a few words what it means to be His disciples. They are challenging words. Many men and women took up the challenge. Today the challenging call to discipleship still goes forth. When they hear it, men will respond. Men are not interested in a spiritual life that is reduced merely to singing and praying. They want to be challenged; they need to be challenged.

Try out these magical words with a man: "I've got a challenge for you." "You are the right one to carry on this business." This approach creates special attention and can stir a man's heart to do more than you could have ever imagined.

A pastor reported the following incident which illustrates how men rise to a challenge. As he arrived at church one Sabbath morning, he met one of his laymen. "At the end of my sermon," the pastor told him, "I'm going to make a call and I was just thinking . . . I know there's this Adventist brother named Jose in our sister church across the city. His testimony would greatly strengthen my appeal. Do you think you could go there and invite him to come to our church for worship this morning and to share his story?"

Without hesitation the layman responded to the challenge. "He'll need to be here not later than 11:45 a.m.," the pastor further instructed. "You're the right person for this job and I trust you. I know you won't fail me."

Now this particular layman worked on the police force during the week and he immediately took charge. He recruited someone with a car to drive across the city and someone else who knew exactly where the sister church was located. Together they all set off on their mission.

By 11:45 a.m., they were all back at the church—with Jose. He was ready and waiting for the pastor to call him up to give his testimony. The pastor saw them come in, right on time. Our Adventist policeman and his team had big smiles of satisfaction on their faces.

Truly, men need to be challenged. They are willing to take up challenging tasks on behalf of those they love, especially for their families. Blessed is the wife who understands her husband's need for challenges, loves him, and prays for him.

“The right word at the right time is like precious gold set in silver” (Proverbs 25:11 CEV). May the understanding of a man's need for recognition and challenge help both husbands and wives to be wiser in crafting the words that are spoken and the lives that are lived at home.

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# *How to Relive Your Honeymoon*

by Edison Choque  
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## **Introduction**

Their honeymoon is the most marvelous time in the life of a married couple. The expression “honeymoon” seems to distill the freshness and happiness of youth. Apparently, it was coined from the idea that the first month (“moon”) of marriage is—like honey—the sweetest, most satisfying time. For those not yet married, but planning on it, my advice is to plan for the best honeymoon possible. Enjoy to the full this time of deep intimacy and getting to know one another in a special way as husband and wife. Unfortunately, too many couples nowadays engage in sexual intimacy before they get married. They miss one of the great joys a honeymoon is intended to give.

Though having a wonderful honeymoon is a good thing, marriage is more than a honeymoon, of course, and a couple’s relationship in marriage should ideally improve with every day and every month that passes. Each month should be sweeter and more satisfactory than the previous one! Sadly, many modern marriages soon begin to decay, sometimes before the honeymoon is over! Perhaps the first month is the best, but then things begin to collapse. In this sermon, we want to look into the experience of Adam and Eve to find ways in which we can reverse the process of decay—to recover the happiness and satisfaction of the honeymoon every day.

## **Honeymoon Begun**

There has not existed a more marvelous honeymoon than that of Adam and Eve, nor has there been an experience of marital intimacy to exceed that which they enjoyed in those first days of pure and rapturous joy in Eden. Theirs was, without a doubt, the perfect marriage. If we seek for a marriage made in heaven, theirs was the one. It was designed and executed by a perfect God.

**Human creation.** First, God formed the man (Gen. 2:7). Under the talent of the Master Artisan, Adam was shaped by his Creator’s hands with a virile, manly physique without defect. He was created in God’s image (Gen. 1:27) with a perfect intellect, stable emotions, and blameless will. He had a brilliant mind, not degenerated by sin. His emotions were without flaw, they included tender and disinterested love—God’s own love.

God made man upright; He gave him noble traits of character, with no bias toward evil. He endowed him with high intellectual powers, and presented before him the strongest possible inducements to be true to his allegiance. Obedience, perfect and perpetual, was the condition of eternal happiness. On this condition he was to have access to the tree of life. (White, 1958, p. 49).

How many young women would like to find a man like this—one mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually perfect, qualified in every way for an ideal married life.

Then, God created the woman. “So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man” (Gen. 2:21-22). Adam must have contemplated with amazement the feminine figure God introduced to him. The supreme expression of God’s creative genius, she was pure beauty of face and form. Molded by God’s hands, Eve could only be the most precious creature that had ever walked on the face of the earth. Like Adam, she too was made in God’s image. Neither her mind, nor emotions, nor will was affected by sin. What man wouldn’t want a woman like her? Adam immediately recognized what they had in common and said:

“This is now bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
she shall be called ‘woman,’  
for she was taken out of man” (Gen. 2:23).

With what devotion Adam welcomed the one who had put an end to his loneliness and filled his life with happiness! She was exactly what he needed. And nothing will satisfy her more than knowing her husband needed her. What an intense and indescribable pleasure they found in each other’s company! They loved each other so much!

**First home.** Their home was Eden, the perfect place (Gen. 2:8). The word *Eden* means “delight.” It truly was a delight—watered by four rivers, the dream every human being would wish for. It was a lush paradise full of everything pleasant to the eye and sweet to the taste (cf. Gen. 2:9). The land had no thorns or thistles or weeds. Tending the garden was light work, totally enjoyable. The first human pair lived and worked together in perfect harmony, aware of their mutual dependence. They were inseparable because their lives were united by a deep current of affection.

The blue heavens were its dome; the earth, with its delicate flowers and carpet of living green, was its floor; and the leafy branches of the goodly trees were its canopy. Its walls were hung with the most magnificent adornings—the handiwork of the great Master Artist. (White, 1958, p. 49)

Genesis 2:18 says that the woman was a “helper corresponding to” Adam (Heb. *ezer kenegdo*). For that to be a reality, she would have to share with him all of her life. As a helper, she was not a servant, but his counterpart, just the part he was missing. She complemented his existence and labor. She would work beside him, give him courage, give him counsel and inspire him. Side by side they lived with a spirit of mutuality. Adam never refused her help, not even her advice; after all, that’s why God gave her to him.

Neither did Eve deny Adam’s leadership. His behavior was never inflated with a sense of superiority. How could he be? His love was perfect. Eve was a very special person for Him and he treated her as such. Giving all of himself to her was little enough expression of his gratitude to God for her. He would never think of receiving anything in return.

The text says, “The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame” (Gen. 2:25). Their relationship was innocent and pure. They were at peace with God, at peace with themselves, at peace with one another, at peace with their world. This was truthfully the perfect marriage of

paradise. How we wish it had lasted until our day so we could also experience the same level of matrimonial blessing they enjoyed in those days of glory. But something happened.

### **Honeymoon Interrupted**

Satan, in snake form, made the first move to interrupt the marital happiness of the first human couple. Listen as Ellen White describes the scene at the tree in the center of the garden:

Eve was surprised and startled as she thus seemed to hear the echo of her thoughts. But the serpent continued, in a musical voice, with subtle praise of her surpassing loveliness; and his words were not displeasing. Instead of fleeing from the spot she lingered wonderingly to hear a serpent speak. Had she been addressed by a being like the angels, her fears would have been excited; but she had no thought that the fascinating serpent could become the medium of the fallen foe.” (White, 1958, p. 54).

Satan doubted God’s words saying, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?” (Gen. 3:1). After doubting the word of God, he sharply refuted it: “You will not surely die” (Gen. 3:4). That was the most seductive lie of all lies, because people want to believe they will not die. When he finished ridiculing God, Satan further distorted the truth: “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:15).

The human pair will know evil for sure, but they will not become like God. In reality, it will be the contrary. God’s likeness, in which they participated, will be disfigured and corrupted in them. Satan’s methods have not changed through the years. We know them well: doubts, distortions, half-truths. Nowadays, we also fall prey to his deceptions and tricks. Perhaps we don’t have to condemn Eve, because it also happens to us, again and again.

**Satan’s wiles.** Satan uses even good things to separate us from God’s will. “When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it” (Gen. 3:6). The experience of Eve was comparable to the temptation described in 1 John 2:16:

- The lust of the flesh - “good for food”
- The lust of the eyes - “pleasing to the eye”
- The pride of life - “desirable for gaining wisdom”

Those are the biggest temptations that Satan uses to pit us against God and against each other: the desire to pursue our own lust, the wish to have material things, the desire to impress people with our importance.

**Covetousness.** Eve, instead of escaping from temptation, had started to flirt with it. She had all of what we can dream for in life—a perfect husband, a perfect home, the perfect company of God, but she stayed there, concentrating on the only thing—the fruit of the tree—that was forbidden, until it became a destructive obsession that brought her happy honeymoon to an end. Since then, that type of vicious covetousness has put an end to many honeymoons. Husbands covet and waste money intended for food on something desired—electronics, hobbies, cars, or clothes. Wives covet and

spend the family income on expensive things for themselves, their homes, their children. Or they induce their husbands to earn more money or take a second job so as to afford more things. In this way, material possessions put a division between spouses that ends the honeymoon.

In the surroundings of the holy pair was a lesson for all time—that true happiness is found, not in the indulgence of pride and luxury, but in communion with God through His created works. If men would give less attention to the artificial, and would cultivate greater simplicity, they would come far nearer to answering the purpose of God in their creation. Pride and ambition are never satisfied, but those who are truly wise will find substantial and elevating pleasure in the sources of enjoyment that God has placed within the reach of all. (White, 1958, pp. 49, 50)

**The power of influence.** Unfortunately Adam also ate of the fruit and so, sadly, he also failed. Adam neglected to provide spiritual support for his wife. Instead, he permitted her to lead him to sin. What a powerful influence spouses have over each other! Each can use their power to stimulate the other to reach the highest spirituality or they can drag each other into shame, even death.

**Consequences.** Mankind's fall filled heaven with sadness. The world that God had created was stained by the curse of sin, its inhabitants doomed to misery and to death. It seemed like there was no escape from those who had broken the law. The angels suspended their hymns of praise. In all the areas of the heavenly courts, there were laments for the ruin that sin had caused.

Instead of the wisdom with which Satan had tempted them, a horrible sensation of guilt and shame invaded their being. In their physical bodies a degenerative process began that would spoil the beauty of God's creation and end in death. The apostle Paul expresses it like this: "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned" (Rom. 5:12). That is what happens with sin; it promises so much and yet it gives so little.

Suddenly, their nakedness became a symbol of their sin (cf. Gen. 3:7). They tried to cover their bodies with fig leaves, but that was not very effective. Later, God clothed them with the skins of animals, revealing all the while that the only adequate way to cover themselves from sin would involve shedding of blood and life being given on their behalf (cf. Heb. 9:22).

They started to blame each other. Adam blamed Eve and God: "The man said, 'The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it'" (Gen. 3:12). For her part, Eve said that the serpent (Satan) made her do it (cf. Gen. 3:13). In a very similar way today, we readily blame someone else for our marital problems: "If only she would stop being so annoying, I could . . ." "If he only was more considerate, I could . . ." Almost always in a troubled marriage, each has contributed in some way to the problem. Each person has to think about what they can do to change and be a "helper" (Heb. *ezer*) for the other person.

The consequences of their sin compromised the whole of existence for both of them. Birth pain ensued for women and a deep desire for the time, attention, affection and security of a husband. For the man, the burden of provision for his family, the toil to work the land became difficult, tedious and endless. As sin affected the marital relationship, there were jealousies, anxieties, increased agitation, irritability and conflict in the home. This was evidenced as Adam and Eve stood near the

first tomb in human history—that of their second son, Abel, who lost his life at the hand of his elder brother, Cain.

The honeymoon was over!

### **Resuming the Honeymoon**

This would be the saddest story ever told if it weren't for a glorious ray of hope with which God illuminated their darkness. Referring to Satan he said: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gen. 3:15). God promised the woman that her offspring—one of her children—would destroy Satan's works, even the desolation that sin had created in the home. This is the first biblical prophecy about the Redeemer who would come. Today we rejoice that He has come! He has died for the world's sins. His perfect blood covers the sins of everyone who trusts in Him.

**Reversing household misfortune.** God sent His Son to reverse our misfortunes in marriage and family, the sad realities of our degenerative homes. In Him it is possible for husbands to have the same caring love and consideration that Adam had for Eve before they sinned. It is possible for wives to have the same encouraging disposition that Eve had for Adam before the Fall.

In Christ, the honeymoon can start again! That is the good news!! But first, each husband and wife must receive Christ as a personal Savior. Without Him there is no hope for our marriages. And marriage will only reach its maximum potential when the husband and wife are certain that they have been forgiven and reconciled with God.

#### **Preparing for a honeymoon recovery.**

- *Recognize the shame of our reality.* Without recognition of our nakedness there is no fixing the problem. Adam and Eve realized their condition and, like so many people who attempt to fix their problems themselves, they tried to do it with fig leaves. God came to their rescue. Only God can give truthful and effective solutions.
- *Recognize that away from God we are going to hurt each other.* Adam and Eve tried to blame each other. I am pretty sure those wounds took time to heal. Without God it is not rare that two people—even people in love—will hurt each other. Nobody can hurt a woman quite like her own husband can and nobody can hurt a man quite like his own wife can. Intimacy without love and grace can be painful. That is the law of sin. For this reason we need to go to the fountain of love to reverse the degenerative process.
- *Recognize that God's provision is the only solution for our problems.* God's provided the Offspring of the woman to crush the serpent's head (Gen.3:15). The Offspring (the Hebrew is in male, singular form) refers to Christ, who would suffer a bite in His heel (death on the cross), but deliver a crushing blow to the serpent (the end of sin's penalty, its power and soon its presence). By His death on the cross, this incredible reconciling act of God, sinners can now receive forgiveness. Jesus Christ's blood cleanses us of every sin. Here is where the real reconstruction of the home begins.

- *Recognize that marriage is forever.* Adam and Eve never broke their commitment to each other, even given the problems they had to face. They remained together until death separated them. Understanding love as a principle and understanding marriage as a vital life-long commitment is crucial to guarantee happiness and family unity.
- *Recognize that we can keep enjoying married happiness even as years pass.* The wise man writes, “May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer—may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love” (Prov. 5: 18, 19). The use of “wife of your youth” occurs here and several places in Scripture to remind men of their marriage commitment, even as their wives age. Scripture envisions marital happiness in all its aspects to continue across the seasons of life.

## **Conclusion**

The happiness interrupted by sin in Eden can return through God’s intervention in the life of each spouse and each couple. God can restore that which has been lost. You can return to the joy once felt in your marriage paradise. Millions of Christian couples testify that it is so. They have experienced the miracle of forgiveness and the miracle of reconciliation. They have recovered the brightness known earlier. Without Christ there is nothing that can be done, but if He is sovereign in our lives, hope re-surfaces, love greens again, and happiness flourishes. God has reconciled Himself to you. Reconcile yourself with God and He will give you a never-ending honeymoon.

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## *Life After an Empty Nest*

by Elaine & Willie Oliver, Directors  
Department of Family Ministries  
General Conference

Q. When you become empty-nesters how do you keep or reignite the spark?

~Teri—Scottsdale, Arizona

A. The level of health of every marriage relationship is based on the habits the spouses practice toward each other on a consistent basis. If a husband and wife are kind, understanding, patient, spiritual, nice, dependable, honest, thoughtful, forgiving, helpful, and make their marriage relationship priority, marriage will be a little heaven on earth. The opposite is also true. By being irritable, impatient, sarcastic, unforgiving, selfish, dishonest, undependable, mean, spiteful, cruel, and disconnected for not making marriage their priority relationship, this type of marriage relationship will become conflicted and devitalized.

What is commonly known as empty nest syndrome is a sensation of loneliness felt by parents or other adult caretakers (guardians, grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc.) when one or more of their children leave home to go to school, get married, or simply move out on their own. While these feelings of loneliness are more likely to be experienced by women, men often experience them as well. These feelings develop when parents feel they are becoming less influential in the lives of their child or children, while the authority or influence of others (professors, spouses, friends, etc.) seems to be growing in importance.

It is essential for married men and women to understand marriage needs to be the primary relationship in their lives. As much as one

loves one's mother and/or father, when one gets married, the spouse becomes the highest priority relationship after God. This is not our opinion, it is God's directive. In Genesis 2:24 God says: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." This means marriage is the only relationship under the sun where we get to become one with another person. We cannot (must not) become one with our son or daughter, that oneness is only reserved for our spouse.

When children are born to a married couple, there is a tendency for the child (or children) to become the focus of primary attention. Because babies are helpless and need the attentiveness of responsible adults to survive and thrive we have the predisposition to go over board and become careless with each other. If husband or wife feels justified in taking this approach the marriage relationship will take a back seat and naturally deteriorate. If not careful and caught early, this pattern may continue until the child or children leave home, rendering marriage a distant, often cold, and spark-free relationship.

If you are married and still child free, follow the counsel we gave in the first paragraph by being intentional about making your spouse your priority relationship even when children come. If you follow this course, when your children leave home you will still have each other for support, love, and affection, and the spark will still be in your marriage. If you have done differently, have a serious conversation with your spouse about the reality of your marital relationship. Ask your

spouse for forgiveness, then find a good Christian counselor that can help you talk through the hurt and pain of the past in order to get a new perspective on the type of marriage you want to have. Dealing with this matter with the help of the right professional will clear the way to reignite the spark you once had.

We hope that *From This Day Forward* you will trust God to develop the kind of marriage

relationship He meant for you to have. We are praying for you.

All Bible references are from the New King James Version.

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## *Watch Your Words*

by Elaine & Willie Oliver, Directors  
Department of Family Ministries  
General Conference

Q. What is the healthiest way to confront immediate issues and what about in front of the children? How about angry outbursts, abusive statements, stubborn and defiant attitudes, disregarding the kids hearing or waking up?

~Cynthia—Takoma, Washington

A. Among the most important basics in healthy relationships is good communication. The opposite is also accurate; poor communication is often at the root of harmful relationships. And, while keeping the proverbial air clear is necessary for a good relationship with one's spouse, achieving this is less about being confrontational and more about finding nonthreatening ways to approach issues which must be managed without delay.

Married people must be conscious of how easy it is to upset the stability of their relationship if it is to remain good. A hasty answer to an emotional trigger often comes with harmful consequences. This means it is significant how we decide what issues to talk about at once, and be aware of the importance to approach such conversations softly, rather than with too much steam. The calmer our manner, the easier it will be for our spouse to hear us and respond thoughtfully.

People with strong and healthy marriages have an easier time of dealing with issues that come up during the course of the day, than couples with strained and unstable relationships. Healthy marriages are recognized by the ability of husbands and wives to speak openly about significant matters on a regular basis.

These couples love, respect, and like each other, and daily affirm and show value for each other. The stronger and healthier the marriage relationship, the easier it will be to talk about issues in a calm and respectful way.

Couples whose relationships are known to be toxic, lethal, and poisonous, often approach conversations with their spouses filled with sarcasm, anger and disrespect. Those exchanges are often self-righteous, loud, and have no regard for the presence of children. This method will solve no problems, further damage marriage, and wound the capacity of the children involved from having the ability to be in stable and happy marriages in the future.

On the other hand, couples who have respect and regard for each other, with an awareness for teaching their children the importance of developing healthy relationships, do well to talk in front of them even about issues they may have different opinions about. When parents conclude a conversation on opposite sides of an issue, it is important for children to observe that there is still love and respect between the parents despite their differences. Of course, parents must also use good judgment in determining what conversations are better held in private, rather than in the presence of their children.

We believe angry outbursts, abusive statements, stubborn and defiant attitudes have no place in homes that welcome the presence of God. Although it is true many Christian homes often witness this type of behavior on a regular basis, this approach needs to stop if we

are to continue to give honor and glory to God.

In order to turn things around, each spouse must take responsibility for his or her part and determine by the power of God not to participate in this kind of behavior any longer. The next step is to find a good marriage conference or retreat you can attend together to learn effective methods of communicating. The more you practice communicating in a patient, kind, and loving way, despite differences of opinion, the easier it will be to make this the rule in your home rather than the exception. This is not easy. However, we believe with God all things are possible,

including the turning around of bad communication habits.

We hope that *from this day forward* you will trust God for patience, a good attitude, and the determination to learn to communicate effectively, so that you may build a healthier marriage and family that gives honor and glory to God. You will continue in our prayers.

From Oliver, W., & Oliver, E.  
(September/October 2009). *Message 75* (5) p.  
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