

The Purpose-Driven Marriage

Use these five biblical purposes to give direction to your marriage.

By Rick Warren

In his book [What's Wrong with the World](#), G. K. Chesterton summed it up well: "If we wish to preserve the family, we must revolutionize the nation." In this exclusive series, we explore seven distinct pillars of Christian marriage. Living by these pillars can not only strengthen your marriage, but in fact, revolutionize the church and the nation. Here, in our first installment, we look at the importance of incorporating Christ in our marriages.
—The Editors

I suppose you'd expect a man who's been married 30 years to a beautiful, intelligent woman would be able to share with you the intimate secrets to having a perfect marriage.

But I'm going to disappoint you! That's because my wife and I don't have a perfect marriage. Kay is without a doubt my best friend, and we have a wonderful relationship—but as far as a perfect marriage, well, there's no such thing.

What Kay and I do have is a marriage centered on Christ, specifically focused on glorifying God. We remain committed to each other because we remain committed to Christ and his work within us.

No easy road

After three decades in ministry, I've noticed that it's not unusual for couples to float through their first year or two of marriage in a love-blinded bliss.

But, frankly, that didn't happen for Kay and me. Our first two years together were the most difficult. In fact, we were ready to throw in the towel. If we both hadn't been committed to Jesus Christ and we both hadn't agreed that divorce was not an option, we wouldn't have stayed together. It was simply too difficult.

Kay even said that in those first few years of marriage, she often wished that one of two things would happen: either she'd be widowed, or God would change his mind and say divorce was now okay!

Since then, we've met many couples who were convinced their marital struggles meant there was no hope for healing. We can say from experience that's not true; there's always hope!

Part of the difficulty for Kay and me is that we were virtual strangers when we got married, but we began finding out things about each other immediately—like the fact that apart from our love for God, we were about as opposite in nature as two people could be.

We viewed life from two different angles and argued over just about everything. I remember Kay's father sat us down the night before we were married and said, "There are five areas where marriages usually have conflict: money, sex, in-laws, children, and communication."

"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:31-32).

He proved to be prophetic: Kay and I went five for five! We fought over every single one of those items.

Not only did we disagree over those things, we couldn't even agree about how to disagree! Kay is an intense person who needs to talk. My preferred method of dealing with problems was just to walk away. That was a volatile combination!

The single factor that kept us married in those early years was that we agreed on one thing: divorce would never be an option for us. You can't leave the door open even a little bit, or eventually one of you will try to escape.

Because we knew we were in it for the long haul, we were forced to accept each other's differences. What else were we going to do?

Slowly, over time, God helped us not only to accept our differences, but to appreciate them. Through the process we learned that any successful marriage is built upon the biblical truth that God designed each of us with five purposes in mind: worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry, and missions.

In other words, until you realize *you* were placed here for God's purposes, then your life—and your marriage—will be difficult, complicated, and exhausting. But once *you* understand God's plan, your life—and your marriage—take on new meaning.

And once you and your spouse *both* get this—when both of you are living purpose-driven lives—then guess what happens?

Your marriage becomes a purpose-driven marriage!

Balancing biblical purposes

Here are the five biblical purposes you should keep balanced in your marriage:

1. You and your spouse were both planned for God's pleasure. How would your marriage immediately change if you understood deeply that your spouse was created for God's pleasure? Or if your spouse understood deeply that you were planned for God's pleasure?

A man once asked Jesus, "What's the most important commandment?" Jesus replied, "I can summarize the entire Bible in two statements: Love God, and love other people!" (Matthew 22:36-39). That includes your spouse.

Life is about relationships, not achievements. First and foremost, it's about developing a relationship with God that will last forever—we call that worship. You also worship God when you love and sacrifice for your spouse (just read through Romans 12 with a view of what its applications would mean to your marriage).

Any time you give pleasure to God, you're worshiping him, and the Bible teaches that loving your spouse—the mate God gave you for a lifetime—brings pleasure to him.

2. You and your spouse were formed for God's family. God made an incredible promise about the gathering of even just two believers: "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst" (Matthew 18:20, nasb).

So if both you and your spouse are believers, God is already in your marriage working to transform the two of you into a purpose-driven family unit! Isn't that incredibly great news?

But Jesus wants us to love real people—not ideal people—and your marriage is a lab for learning how to love like Jesus loves.

It seems funny now, but one conflict between Kay and me in marriage was over the really trivial issue of soap! For me, a hot steamy shower is a spiritual experience—right up there with eating fresh cinnamon rolls. I also happen to be a person who gets bored quickly, so I like variety; I don't want to use the same kind of soap all the time.

One day I told Kay we needed some different kinds of soap. But I said it in a way that sounded as though our marriage was a failure because we used the same kind of soap all the time. Three or four months later at Christmas, to "get back at me," she wrapped and placed 27 different bars of soap under the tree!

My point is that within marriage, God has created an opportunity for us to develop a true intimacy and authenticity with another human being. God wants for you and your spouse to go beyond the superficial chit-chat that is, unfortunately, so common in many marriages.

To go this deep requires genuine, heart-to-heart, gut-level sharing, where you and your spouse get honest about who you are and what's happening in your lives. This happens when you both open up to each other and share your hurts, reveal your feelings, confess your failures, disclose your doubts, admit your fears, acknowledge your weaknesses, and ask each other for help and prayer.

3. You and your spouse were both created to become like Christ. As I mentioned, marriage is a laboratory for developing God's love in you. He'll use your spouse to build his values, attitudes, morals, and character within you.

Once you understand this, a lot of what happens within your marriage will begin to make more sense. When you start to ask, "Why is this happening to me?" The answer is—to make you more like Jesus!

In fact, the Bible teaches that God builds certain qualities within our lives by putting us in situations that make it difficult to show these qualities. In other words, for God to teach you real love, he'll put you around some unlovely people. For God to teach you real joy, he'll allow you to go through times of grief. To learn inner peace and patience, he'll allow storms of chaos and stressful situations in your life that test your patience and teach you to trust him.

In his book [*Sacred Marriage*](#), our friend Gary Thomas makes the case that marriage was not meant to make you happy; it was meant to make you holy. That was an eye-opener for Kay and me. It made such sense. If God's purpose for each of our lives is to make us look more like Jesus, what better tool could he use than the marriage relationship?

Who better for God to use to chisel you than the person you live with seven days a week? When the difficult times come, you just have to realize you're being worked on! God is using each of you to shape the other person more and more into the image of Jesus.

4. You and your spouse were both shaped for serving God. The Bible says, "God has made us what we are. In Christ Jesus, God has made us to do good works, which God planned in advance for us to live our lives doing" (Ephesians 2:10, ncv).

We serve God by serving others, and we serve God by serving our spouse. God shapes us for service through a variety of methods, including our spiritual gifts, our passions, our abilities, our personality, and our experiences.

In fact, God will use the difficulties in your marriage to shape you into an effective minister to others. Who could better help the parents of a Down syndrome child than other parents with a Down syndrome child? Who could better help somebody recover from the pain of an addiction, a business failure, or a prodigal child than a couple who has been through these things and emerged with godly insights?

Could it be that the part of your marriage you regret or resent most—that which you've wanted to hide or forget—is the very thing God wants to use as your ministry to help and encourage others sharing the same struggle? God doesn't just use our strengths; he uses our weaknesses, and even our failures!

5. You and your spouse were both made for a mission. Your marriage not only involves ministry, it also involves mission. Your ministry is to believers and your mission is to non-believers—allowing God to use your marriage as a means for telling others about his love.

This may take many forms, from being a witness in your neighborhood to going overseas on mission trips together. The fact is, if you want God's blessing on your marriage, then you must care about what God cares about most. What is that? He wants his lost children found! He wants everyone to know him and his purposes for their lives.

If you want to see how much God cares about the people around you, just look at the Cross. With outstretched arms, Jesus says, "I love them this much!"

Marriage is a life-long process designed to teach you to see the needs of another person as more important than your own. It's a difficult transition because it's not natural. It's not natural for me to look at life from Kay's point of view, and it's not natural for her to look at life from my point of view.

To think this way requires an intentional shift that can be made only through the power of God in your life. As you and your spouse make that shift, your marriage will become more and more purpose-driven—focused on the needs of others and balancing the purposes of worship, fellowship, discipleship, service, and missions.

The reward is greater than anything you could ever imagine. I've often thought what would have happened—or not happened—had Kay and I thrown in the towel many years ago. There would be no Saddleback Church, no purpose-driven ministry, and no "Purpose-Driven Life"!

God's plan for you and your spouse—for your marriage—is wider and deeper than anything in your wildest, craziest dreams. May our heavenly Father help you to catch this vision as you chase it into the future.

Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in Southern California, is best-selling author of [The Purpose-Driven Life](#) (Zondervan).

Selfish Transformation

The real transforming work of marriage is the twenty-four-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week commitment. This is the crucible that grinds and shapes us into the character of Jesus Christ... Marriage calls us to an entirely new and selfless life... Any situation that calls me to confront my selfishness has enormous spiritual value.

—Gary Thomas, [Sacred Marriage](#) (Zondervan)

Through Heaven's Eyes

You may ask how you can see your spouse as God does. This perspective comes only from prayer. Concern for my wife's spiritual journey leads me to pray regularly for her, asking that I will be able to discern the Spirit's presence and activity in her life and thereby support, never obstruct, the Spirit. The more I pray for her, the more I see her as God sees her—through eyes of love and concern for her spiritual growth.

—David G. Benner, [Sacred Companions](#) (InterVarsity Press)

Pleasing To God?

If I believe the primary purpose of marriage is to model God's love, I will enter this relationship and maintain it with an entirely new motivation, one hinted at by Paul: "So we make it our goal to please him" (2 Corinthians 5:9).

For the Christian, the first question we should ask ourselves when doing anything is, "Will this be pleasing to Jesus Christ?"

The first purpose in marriage—beyond happiness, sexual expression, the bearing of children, companionship, mutual care and provision, or anything else—is to please God.

The challenge, of course, is that it is utterly selfless living; rather than asking, "What will make me happy?" we are told that we must ask, "What will make God happy?"

—Gary Thomas, [Sacred Marriage](#) (Zondervan)

Time After Time

Becoming married takes time. It doesn't happen on the wedding day. The wedding is only the beginning of a relationship that can be expected to endure and grow. What happens is that over time God's grace becomes visible in the marriage relationship. It becomes visible and real to the married couple, of course, but in a wonderful way it also becomes visible to the people who are touched by the relationship, to family and friends, to neighbors and fellow church members.

—Douglas J. Brouwer, [Beyond "I Do"](#) (Eerdmans)

In the Image of God

When was the last time you looked at your mate watching TV, maybe with a beer in his hand, and thought, *He is made in the image and likeness of God?*

When was the last time you sat across the dinner table and didn't stare down into your plate, but into the eyes of someone reflecting the image and likeness of God?

When was the last time you pressed warmly against your mate, knowing she is made in the image and likeness of God—and not just a body there for your amusement?

What a difference a divine image can make in a marriage. When you begin to relate as males and females according to your super-natural image, you move past the popular illusions and begin to pay attention to what is essential, spiritual, eternal, and even holy about your mate. Hanging bellies, thinning hair, or sagging breasts no longer become your standard for your mate. Your perspective changes from carnal to spiritual: you cease to see your mate as just an object whose sole purpose is to attract you or satisfy you.

When you begin to see your mate as the image and likeness of God, your marriage, no matter how exiled, will instantly realign to God's order. After all, how can you disregard the image and likeness of God? Can you really justify impoliteness or cruelty to the image and likeness of God? Is it possible not to find something beautiful or handsome in the image and likeness of God—regardless of what someone actually looks like? How could anyone, in good conscience, cheat on the image and likeness of God?

In fact, devotion, respect, kindness, caring, consideration, adoration, honesty, nurturing, chivalry, trustworthiness, truthfulness—a list as infinite as the Infinite One—are the only ways to treat the image and likeness of God.

When you correctly view your mate—not according to the warped, twisted, politically correct, fly-by-night, and faddish standards of a fallen world—but as God created that person to be, you set your marriage on the high road.

—Michael Shevack, [*Adam & Eve: Marriage Secrets from the Garden of Eden*](#) (Paulist Press)