



Two Churches, One Marriage

The Meaning of Marriage



Education

Factors That Influence Our Views on Marriage
Topics That Interchurch Couples Should Explore
A Process for Exploring Your Level of Compatibility

Factors That Influence Our Views on Marriage

Individuals develop their views and values about marriage from a variety of sources. Below are four important sources of information about marriage. As you read each section, consider the ways in which your views or values regarding marriage have been influenced by each of these sources.

Church – Different denominations can have somewhat different attitudes or beliefs about marriage. Catholics, for example, define marriage as one of the seven sacraments. In contrast, many Protestant denominations believe only baptism and communion are sacraments. Rather than define marriage as a sacrament, many Protestant denominations view marriage as a covenant. Churches or denominations can also have different positions on other issues related to marriage, such as birth control, or the acceptability divorce and remarriage.

Childhood (Family of Origin) – Our views of marriage can also be shaped by our childhood experiences, particularly in what we have seen modeled about marriage by our parents. Ted, for example, saw his mother have nine different marriages, which made him question the permanence of marriage. His partner, Samantha, in contrast, saw her parents stay together for life despite a difficult illness that her mother experienced. This couple struggled with a shared meaning of marriage. Samantha wanted assurance that Ted would love her in the future, an assurance that Ted was unwilling to give because he doubted the long-term viability of marriage.

Circle of Friends – A pastor once said that there are two important decisions that a couple will make that will impact the success of their marriage. Who they choose to marry is the most important decision they make. The second most important decision was whom the couple chose as their circle of friends. He went on to say that if the couple had a network of friends who saw divorce as a viable solution to marital difficulties, then they would be much more susceptible to similar thinking. If a couple chose a circle of friends committed to making marriages work even in difficult times, then they would be more likely to do the same. Thus, he urged couples to carefully consider



Two Churches, One Marriage

their circle of friends in light of their potential influence. This advice illustrates how important an influence our peers or friends can have in our lives.

Culture – Our culture is another powerful source of information about marriage. Our American culture both values and devalues marriage in a variety of ways. The fact that the vast majority of Americans will marry at some point in time illustrates the value that society places on marriage. At the same time, however, the number of couples who choose to cohabitate as an alternative to marriage has grown dramatically in recent time. In addition, ending a marriage through divorce has become quite common. Current estimates are that nearly half of all marriages today will eventually end in divorce.

Society can also influence our views on what it takes to have a successful marriage. A common belief in our society is “that love conquers all,” ignoring the fact that certain skills are necessary for many couples to sustain a healthy relationship. The high divorce rate today highlights the challenge that many couples face in building a satisfying and enduring marriage. Despite this fact, it is far more difficult to get a driver's license than a marriage license in most states. It has also been observed that couples will often spend thousands of dollars on a wedding, but will spend far less time, money, or effort preparing for their actual marriage.

An individual's racial/ethnic culture can also influence the views or values surrounding marriage. Some cultures, for example, put primary emphasis on the marital bond, while other cultures put primary emphasis on the parent-child bond. Different cultures may also vary on the stigma attached to divorce. Racial/ethnic messages about marriage are often intimately intertwined with family and religious rituals or customs.

Topics That Interchurch Couples Should Explore

It is important that both you and your partner evaluate your views and values regarding marriage to ensure you are sufficiently compatible with one another. Being compatible does not necessarily mean that you agree on each and every item. There should always be room for individual differences. On major issues or values, however, there should be more similarity than differences. This section explores possible topics that may be particularly important for interchurch couples to explore because of the potential for differences due to different religious backgrounds.

The role of God in the relationship – Research shows that interchurch couples are more likely than same-church couples to differ in the importance that each partner gives to religion. Therefore, you might explore how important God is to each of you, and how differences, if they exist, may impact your relationship. Does one of you, for example, see marriage as primarily as a legal arrangement, while the other sees it as primarily a religious union? What role, if any, does each of you see God playing in your relationship? Do you see God having little or no influence on your relationship, or do you believe God should play a central or key role in your relationship? Will you and your partner, for example, pray together to God about your relationship? What spiritual principles or values, if any, will guide you as you face the inevitable challenges of marriage?



Two Churches, One Marriage

Divorce and commitment – Different denominations differ in their acceptance of divorce and remarriage. Although couples in love often do not think about divorce, it is recommended that you explore with one another your views on commitment and divorce. Under what circumstances, for example, would divorce be acceptable to you or your partner? What actions will you and your partner take if you encounter difficulties in the future? Would you both be willing, for example, to seek help from a therapist or clergy person if problems arose in the relationship?

Gender roles – Different denominations can also vary on the roles that are prescribed or allowed for men and women. In a letter to the Ephesians (Chapter 6, verses 22-23), Paul states, “Wives should be submissive to their husbands as if to the Lord because the husband is head of his wife just as Christ is head of his body the church, as well as its savior.” This controversial passage has been interpreted in different ways. Based on this passage, some believe the husband is in a leadership position, and that the wife should submit to his authority in all matters. Others believe that Paul's subsequent statements to husbands in Ephesians, Chapter 6 (verses 25-30) are evidence that both men and women are equally called to love and submit to the other's needs. Paul states, for example, “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church (verse 25).” Regardless of one's position, it is prudent that a couple share a common view of gender roles. Do both you and your partner, for example, favor equal or egalitarian roles for men and women? Or, do you both view the husband in a leadership position, with the wife submitting to his authority? To avoid serious conflict, it is important that each of you be clear with one another regarding your expectations in this critical area.

Children and religion – Couples generally recognize the wisdom of exploring with one another whether or not to have children, and how many children are desired. For interchurch couples, it is also wise to explore the importance that religion will play in the upbringing of children. What role, if any, will God play in the family life? Are both partners equally committed to providing a religious upbringing for their children, or is one person more committed to this than the other? Have you and your partner discussed the core values or teachings that you want instilled in your children? What are your expectations about which church or churches, if any, the child will be raised? This can be a difficult topic for many interchurch couples, and will be discussed in more detail in a separate unit.

Family planning/contraception – Different denominations have different teachings regarding the acceptability of various forms of birth control. The Catholic Church, for example, forbids the use of any artificial form of contraception. Other denominations, in contrast, do not necessarily prohibit couples using artificial means of contraception. Given these potential differences, it would be helpful for couples to discuss what forms of family planning will be acceptable to both parties. The couple should also discuss what they would do in the event an unplanned pregnancy did occur. Would they decide to raise the child, or consider another alternative such as placing the child for adoption? To what extent does each partner see abortion as a morally acceptable or unacceptable alternative? The answers to these questions can significantly impact a relationship. One woman stated to her fiancé that she would rather divorce than consider an abortion in the event of an unwanted pregnancy.



Two Churches, One Marriage

Other Areas – These topics or questions do not address all the areas that a couple can or should explore in assessing the compatibility of their values or expectations. Ideally, you would also explore your attitudes and beliefs on other topics such as how to handle finances, dealing with extended family or friends, sexuality, leisure activities, or career decisions. The topics that have been discussed here, however, are the areas that may be particularly important for interchurch couples to address. If you are interested in exploring your relationship in other areas, you may want to take a relationship inventory such as FOCCUS/REFOCCUS, PREPARE/ENRICH, or RELATE. These inventories are commonly used in premarital counseling or marriage enrichment to help couples explore their relationship in more depth on a wide range of topics. These inventories are intended to provide couples a springboard for exploring their relationship through discussion.

See the Supplemental Resources section for more information about the various relationship inventories.

A Process for Exploring Your Level of Compatibility

This section outlines steps that you and your partner can take to evaluate how compatible your views of marriage are with one another. These steps, used in conjunction with the topics or questions suggested in the previous section, will help you develop a shared understanding of where you and your partner are similar or different in regards to key values and beliefs.

Step One: Know Thyself – A recommended first step is to clarify what are the key beliefs and attitudes about marriage that you possess. Hopefully, the questions that have been raised in the previous section have begun to facilitate this process for you. In reality, learning about ourselves (or our partners) is an on-going process.

Step Two: Critically Examine Your Beliefs – In addition to identifying your beliefs, it is often helpful to critically examine the validity of those beliefs or attitudes. As children, it is often difficult to assess the validity of the values or beliefs passed on to us by our parents or other authorities. As result, we adopt and live by a number of beliefs or attitudes that have never been closely examined. Beliefs or attitudes about marriage are no exception. It can be helpful, therefore, to carefully consider where and when you learned certain beliefs about marriage as a starting point in evaluating their validity. An individual who came from a family with multiple divorces may have internalized a very different set of beliefs about marriage than an individual raised in an intact family.