

4 Keys Billy Graham and Charles Stanley Recommend for a Strong Marriage

Before he went to heaven, Billy Graham told us in his autobiography that if he could do it again, he'd do two things differently. He'd refuse to be pressured into speaking so much and he'd spend more time with his wife and family.

Billy's wife, Ruth, once was asked in an interview if during her marriage she ever thought about divorce. She replied with a wink and a nod, "Divorce? No. Murder? ... well..."

When Charles Stanley, the legendary Southern Baptist pastor, author and leader of "In Touch" global ministries recently died at 90, millions mourned, paid tribute and also remembered the man and his marital woes. Those of us who lived in Atlanta where he served as pastor of First Baptist Church for nearly 50 years, experienced periodic reports of the challenges he and Anna faced.

One of my historical heroes of the faith, John Wesley, founder of Methodism, once had his wife so upset, she grabbed him by the hair and flung his Bible across the room. A pastor's wife told us she did something similar with her husband's cell phone!

Getting Help and Gaining Hope

Like millions, I've benefited immensely from the ministry of these giants in the faith. Their imperfections allowed them to empathize with others as they inspired us to live for the glory of God.

Every marriage has challenges; pressure reveals the person and we don't run from inevitable conflict but rather to God and

His Word when the heat is on. And we don't rationalize going our separate ways, excusing sin and shifting blame saying flippantly, "the marriage was broken..." "it just wasn't a good fit..." or "the time came to go our separate ways." God's design for marriage is based on a sacred covenant—not like high school dating.

Stanley famously said, "Circumstances and events that we see as setbacks are oftentimes the very things that launch us into periods of intense, spiritual growth." People all around us need to see couples practicing this principle as recent statistics show 689,308 divorces amidst 1,985,072 marriages with 60% citing infidelity as a reason for their divorce

4 Essentials to Stay Strong

I'd like to offer four insights to help us persevere through tough times and stay strong. By the grace of God, my wife and I just celebrated our 47th anniversary and offer these four keys we've found helpful. If you've been through a divorce, learn from past mistakes to proceed on a new path to please Him.

1. Christ – My wife and I made a total commitment of our lives to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior before we were married. We pledged to keep Him first in our lives and cultivate an ever-deepening relationship with Him.

We made a quality decision to "seek first His kingdom" in every area of our lives (Matt. 6:33). We're radicals in devotion, living "for the praise of His glory" (Eph.1:12), and it pays off richly.

2. Covenant – When we exchanged our marriage vows, we understood they were permanent, binding for life. We said to each other in the presence of 1200 witnesses, "divorce is not an option" and we'd never even use the word when in conflicts (we haven't!).

God's dealings with mankind have always been on the basis of covenant, and that's the way He ordained for us to relate in the marriage relationship. This enables us to reveal God's expressed purpose for a marriage which is a living demonstration of Christ's relationship with His church before a watching world (Eph. 5:22-28).

Among the 24 marriages in our extended family there are no divorces. And among the 140 close couples we've known, there's been only two divorces. Praise be to God! Don't believe the enemy's lies to cause you to be cynical and give up on your future.

3. Communication – Most problems in marriage, business and ministries come because of failure regarding communication and expectations. This is why communication is not optional but essential and needs to be planned, consistent, unhurried and in-depth.

Setting aside regular times for catching up and meaningful interaction; establishing a consistent date night and sharing special "overnight" getaways have enabled us to keep our marriage relationship healthy and fun.

A weekly date night (we practiced this for decades while children were still at home) is not an hour at the end of the day, just watching some movie, a family night, time with other couples or reading books in separate rooms. It's time to stay current and draw out one another's feelings and perspectives plus possibly plan, pray and dream together.

4. Community – The Christian life was never intended to be lived independently in isolation. Meaningful involvement in a local church community and other ministries with like-minded followers of Jesus provide the relational support, encouragement and accountability we all need.

We thank God for many friends who have been there for us in our times of need as well as Standing Stone Ministry (for

pastoral couples) who have all provided depth and experience in addition to being radically committed to the Scriptures versus “therapeutic psychobabble.”

✖ For years, we gathered for a weekend retreat with couples in a similar season of life. We shared meals together and laughter along with transparent discussion about schedules, current challenges, child-rearing, health, romance and the state of our relationship (“Scale of 1-10, where do we think we are?” The men usually offered “8, 9 or 10.” The wives often said, “3, 4 or 5,”—the more realistic ones).

Every couple goes through rough patches and periods of unusual stress and conflict. A marriage is not the absence of conflict but the overcoming of it and we all need help from faithful parents, leaders and friends, ideally in a local church community where every Christian should be planted (Acts 2:42-47).

Here’s the Deal: Multitudes of people in America are tragically living in “silent divorce.” Others are fearful of entering marriage because of what they witness. We encourage you to reflect upon these four essentials in these turbulent times. Pass them along to your children and any friends who are married or contemplating this big step in their lives. People today need hope. They also need both a declaration and demonstration of strong and successful Christian marriages modeling God’s original intent. Be a candidate to help turn things around for the glory of God! {eoa}

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