

Love + Respect=Marital Bliss

Best-selling author Emerson Eggerichs has cracked the marriage communication code. He says the answer has been hidden in plain sight for 2,000 years.

Imagine Robin Williams in a manic appearance on Late Show with David Letterman. Now imagine his crazy energy focused on a singular topic, instead of the sampler platter of conversation that Williams usually totes with him. Now imagine that energy tempered by the cool intellectualism-but none of the fustiness-of David Hyde-Pierce (. Niles Crane from Frasier). Now imagine that he speaks with the spiritual directness of the Apostle Paul.

Got it? Now, one more thing: Add some fashionable glasses.

This is a pretty good picture of Dr. Emerson Eggerichs as he stalks the sanctuary stage of a Southern Baptist church in Oklahoma City, energetically delivering a lecture he's given many times before ... and getting a reaction he's also gotten many times before.

There are a lot of furrowed brows in the audience of a thousand or so on this Saturday morning. A lot of nods, too. If you could see into the realm of metaphor and symbolism, you'd have to wear sunglasses to protect your eyes from all the light bulbs clicking on over people's heads.

Welcome to the Love & Respect conference, hosted by Eggerichs (pronounced "EGG-er-rich"). Scenes like this are not uncommon at the weekend events, as husbands and wives respond to the radical (and biblical) new teaching they hear from Eggerichs: That while men are biblically compelled to love their wives unconditionally, women are also biblically compelled to respect their husbands in the same way.

A simple message, to be sure, but one that until now, hasn't even been touched in the modern church.

"It's been hidden in plain sight for 2,000 years," Eggerichs is fond of saying. He's referring to the biblical precedent he gives to this teaching, the read-until-it's-lost-all-meaning verse of Ephesians 5:33: "Nevertheless, each individual among you is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she respects her husband" (NASB). While this verse has been tapped frequently for relational/marital purposes, it has rarely-if ever-been presented as Eggerichs does.

One-on-one, Eggerichs sheds his stage persona and becomes more quiet, more introspective, yet still energized about the topic of discussion. He has to be-he's fighting against a grand cultural misperception.

"There's a general consensus in the culture that respect needs to be earned," says Eggerichs, a former pastor. "But what I'm saying-and what I believe the Bible says-is that just like a wife needs to be loved for who she is, so also a husband needs to be respected unconditionally. It's not a matter of him deserving it; it's a matter of him needing it."

How has no one ever seen this before?

"It's been ignored in the last 40 years. The radical feminist movement and its undercurrent taught that you could have contempt for men just because they are men," Eggerichs explains. "If a man did something just because he's a man, and it isn't acceptable to a woman, then she has a right to show him contempt. For example, stonewalling during marital conflict is a very natural thing for a man to do. Because women consider that unloving, they become belligerent and go through the roof. But in actuality, biologically, he's probably trying to calm himself down, do the honorable thing, and not cause a fight."

It's a point he makes with clarity and precision: "There's no debate over a wife needing love. No one in the culture or the church argues that. It's the second part of the verse where wives are supposed to show respect to the spirit of the husband regardless of results. A lot of people have ignored the second half of the verse because people believe-and our culture has taught-that respect should be earned. So when Paul says wives should show respect, it gets filtered through that cultural norm, and we don't know what to do with it. But it's not that a man deserves respect, that's not the point. He needs it."

While working as a senior pastor for a church in Lansing, Mich., Eggerichs spent 20 years as a scholar of the Word. "I had the privilege of studying the Bible for 30 hours a week for 20 years," he says. "In 1998, I was meditating on that passage in Ephesians when I had what I call an illumination, where I saw this love and respect connection."

According to Eggerichs, couples get caught in what he terms the "crazy cycle" (see page 34). "When the wife feels unloved," he says, "she reacts in a way that feels disrespectful to the husband, and when the husband feels disrespected, he reacts in a way that feels unloving to her." Eggerichs claims that understanding this connection between love and respect is a crucial part of cracking the communication code between husbands and wives.

When Eggerichs discovered this "love and respect connection," he did two things with it: He drew up an outline that he then sent to 40 or so of his closest pastoral friends, and he tried it out in his own marriage.

The responses that he got from his colleagues were overwhelming. B.J. Weber, chaplain for the New York Yankees, told Eggerichs that he broke down and cried when he read the outline. Eggerichs had stumbled onto something big.

Within a year, he was considering resigning his senior pastor position at a growing church (they'd gone from 450 to 2,000 during his time there) in order to focus on this message.

"It wasn't my intent to get into marriage per se," he recalls. "I consider myself a Bible teacher who suddenly saw something in Scripture. Plus, I have a Ph.D. in family-related studies ["I'm educated beyond my intellect," he jokes with his conference audiences], and I realized that the social sciences were saying something else. And it seemed to me that no one was really unpacking this. I felt a responsibility to steward a message."

So he and his wife, Sarah, launched the Love & Respect conferences in 1999. This quickly led to a guest appearance on James Dobson's Focus on the Family radio program. The listener feedback to Eggerichs' message was overwhelming, and the show on which he appeared became one of Focus on the Family's most requested broadcasts of 2003.

A few months later, Eggerichs released his message in book form, and Love & Respect hit the shelves to almost immediate word-of-mouth success. Since its release in September 2004, the book has become a national best-seller and a Gold Medallion winner.

People were starting to listen. People like Glen and Sally Mulready. Glen is a successful businessman originally from the Boston area, and Sally is a former flight attendant from the Midwest and now a full-time stay-at-home mom. They met by chance in a Boston restaurant, dated off and on for a while, and then married with the intent of soon raising a family.

Thirteen years later, things had gotten stale. Sally relates: "At this point in our marriage, my head was down to the ground taking care of the children, and I looked up one day and I saw my husband going in one direction and myself going in another."

That's when the tension set in.

"The kids threw us off kilter," Sally continues, "and I began to see that we were no longer wanting the same things. We didn't care what each other thought, and for the first time in our marriage, we weren't unified. We couldn't find unity for a million bucks." Soon, the atmosphere of their quaint home had darkened, and almost turned tragic when Sally decided on a drastic course of action.

"I was leaving. I couldn't live like this anymore. I was going to go somewhere, I was going to take the boys-I had to leave. I had to get out of this marriage," Sally recalls.

The Mulreadys had tried talking with Jett and Dana Stubbs, a couple in their church that specializes in marital counseling. But they'd gone nowhere-until that word-of-mouth that's made Love & Respect a success happened to find its way into their neck of the woods.

Sally contacted Dana and told of her intentions to pack up her tents. With some careful persuasion, Dana convinced Sally to stick it out and read the first 30 pages of Eggerichs' book. Reluctantly, she agreed.

"I went and got the book, came home about 2 [p.m.] and read maybe the first 10, 15 pages, and by 5 [p.m.], when Glen came home, this house, this wife-it was a new day," Sally explains.

Today, Glen and Sally have a happy home. Three cute little boys. Designer colors on the walls. Fresh chocolate chip cookies on the table. But they're far from perfect.

"I'm not 100 percent on the other side of this to where it's over and done," says Glen, referring to the idealistic, problem-free marriage. "This message was a catalyst that's helped us move through a short period of change and growth and perspective, but still we're continuing that on a daily basis."

Sally adds: "This book reaffirmed that Glen really loves me and really adores me, and I love and adore him. Getting into the hostility, it's easy to lose track of that. This book reminds us that even in a loving, caring relationship, it can get ugly."

There's a reason Jett and Dana Stubbs recommend Love & Respect to couples like the Mulreadys. "The message deals with how you think in your heart and how you view your spouse," Jett explains. "It allows me to concentrate on her needs instead of my needs. Instead of basing it on self-interest, I'm basing it on her interest."

Indeed, one of the keys to Eggerichs' love and respect message is something he calls "the assumption of goodwill."

"What happens emotionally when people are in crisis, they have a hard time believing that their spouse is really goodwilled," Eggerichs says. "There's this, 'She's disrespectful, she's offensive, and she's way too negative,' or, 'He's unloving, he's too offensive, and he's reactionary.' And they lock into that and say, 'Because of that, I know you're ill-willed toward me.' So then I come in and say, 'Are you going to go on record and say you're married to Hitler's distant cousin? Are you willing to go that far?' "

Eggerichs says that husbands and wives often get confused at each other's behavior, not because it's wrong necessarily, but because it's different. Women are craving love. Men are craving respect. There are two fundamental differences that God created men and women to have, and couples who can learn to accept these differences will begin to experience relational breakthroughs.

It worked for the Stubbs. As ministerial counselors, they'd seen a lot of different relationship fixes come and go. "Other messages are based on behavior modification issues," Jett says. "The love and respect message really gets to the heart

of the issue and deals with each individual's heart, and not just their behavior."

And therein lies the other key to the success of this message: the individual heart.

"I can only control my actions and my reactions," Eggerichs explains. "I can't control the outcomes of my spouse, and God hasn't given me that right. I can do certain things that make those responses easier, but overall, God says that I'm going to have to give an account for myself. I am not responsible for my spouse. That's a liberating thing."

Sally Mulready says the same thing. When she was contemplating leaving her husband, she came up with one crucial criterion for the Love & Respect book Dana had given her: "I had to know that I could read this book and life could be different. Don't tell me that I have to read a book and get Glen to read it. I knew that I couldn't be responsible for any change that other people were doing-I had to get rid of the crud in my own heart," Sally says. "I saw change because my heart was changed."

Eggerichs knows his message is controversial to some, but he doesn't let that controversy bother him or deter him. As he travels from conference to conference, he sees the reactions in his audiences, and he understands that for many people, this is all new.

Back on the stage, he's wrapping up an anecdote about communication in his own marriage, playacting both sides of the conversation with slight male/female affectations in his voice. It's getting a laugh, which is a good thing when you're trying to help people let go of the past and move toward forgiveness.

"Even though they're hurt and angry, most couples on the crazy cycle realize there's still goodwill there," Eggerichs says. "Then they start to soften because they realize that impugning

their spouse is a pretty severe judgment. Most people begin to give their spouse the benefit of the doubt.”

Adam Palmer is a freelancer from Tulsa, Okla. Learn more about Emerson Eggerichs and Love & Respect conferences at [. This article originally appeared in *New Man* magazine in 2006.](#)