

No Two Marriages Are Alike, But Some Are Amazingly Like Yours

No marriage is perfect.

The union of two godly well-intentioned disciples of Jesus Christ does not guarantee a successful marriage.

And even the successful ones—however we would define that—in almost every case have had their ups and downs.

So, if you've been feeling like a failure because a) your husband spends more time at the church than at home, b) your wife isn't nearly the cook or housekeeper your mom was, c) you and your spouse argue, d) you have each lost your temper and said/done some things you regretted later, or e) all of the above, then ...

Welcome to the human race.

I've been reading William J. Petersen's book, *25 Surprising Marriages: Faith-building Stories from the Lives of Famous Christians*.

Petersen has written chapters on the marriages of people like Martin and Katie Luther, C. S. and Joy Lewis, and Billy and Nell Sunday. He writes about Charles and Susie Spurgeon, Dwight and Emma Moody, John and Molly Wesley, and Billy and Ruth Graham. He has chapters titled "Grace Livingston Hill and her two husbands," and "John Bunyan and his two wives."

He could well have included a chapter on Elisabeth Elliot and her three husbands, but didn't.

As a minister, I find myself wishing we had discovered this wonderful volume (written in 1997) back when Margaret and I

were in the thick of pastoring and she was chafing under the demands of the ministry, the expectations of the church members, and the absenteeism and/or distraction of her husband.

These days, I tell young pastors' wives that they have so much in common with one another, even across denominational lines. The wife of the Church of God pastor, the wife of the Holiness pastor, the wife of the Presbyterian pastor, the wife of the Christian Church pastor, and the wife of the Southern Baptist pastor, to name a few, all fight the same battles.

What battles?

I'm glad you asked. See if any of this sounds familiar ...

"You're going out again tonight? When are you going to have time for your family?" "Why can't that committee meet without you?" "The children need to see more of their father." "I wish you would learn to say 'no' to some of these invitations. You don't 'have' to go to all those other places to preach."

That's the wife talking. Want to hear the husband?

"You're home all day. I work hard so you won't have to work outside the home. I'd like some appreciation." "The church provides this home for us. The least we can do is keep it looking presentable. You never know when someone may drop in on us." "My mother would never have done that."

You thought your home was different—that you and your spouse were failing and that all the other ministers had better home lives than you—but you'd be surprised how normal your home is.

About these famous Christian couples, William Petersen writes, "I certainly don't want to debase these men and women whom God has used in spectacular ways. But it is good to see them as mortals with shortcomings and foibles."

These great men and women of God had shortcomings? Listen to

Petersen ...

"It is good to see Francis Schaeffer smashing the pot of ivy and Polly Newton biting her fingernails when her husband is late in coming home. It is good to hear Catherine Marshall unable to understand why her husband had to travel so much. It is good to hear Ruth Graham complaining that her husband seemed to be taking her for granted, and to find Katie Luther taking the hinges off the door of her husband's study after he had locked himself in."

My wife Margaret—whom some may think I beatified after her homegoing last January—once poured a bottle of black India ink all over my office desk and ruined the cartoons I was working on for the Foreign Mission Board. "You have time for everyone but your own family!" she said through the tears and anger.

Petersen writes, "The marriages of Christian leaders seem to be more fraught with clogs and bogs than the average Christian marriage."

Get that? Their marriages are a lot like yours, only more so.

"When you think about it," he continues, "this is not surprising. Greatness, like genius, places unusual stress on marriage. For one thing, leaders are in the spotlight, and nothing grows normally under such conditions."

Not only that, Petersen says, (But) "the very gifts and character traits that make a person stand out as a leader may make him or her a challenge as a marriage partner."

Ladies, you do not want to be married to Joel Osteen, David Jeremiah, or Charles Stanley—nor to Rick Warren, Max Lucado, or me. (I just added that to see if you're still reading this).

After Catherine Marshall wrote *A Man Called Peter*, the story of her beloved husband Peter Marshall, who died at 46, the

book was turned into a movie. We're told a lot of young people entered the ministry as a result of the impact of their story. And, my guess is a lot of pastors' wives watched that Hollywood star on the screen with his delightful Scottish burr and compared him with their balding preacher husband with the spreading waistline and the Alabama hill-country speech, and grew dissatisfied with their marriages.

If they only knew.

Martin Luther said, "I would not change Katie for France or for Venice." Then he added, "If I should ever marry again, I should hew myself an obedient wife out of stone."

Your wife doesn't take orders very well, Martin? Margaret, did you get that? We've found your patron saint.

Martin Luther would sometimes spend the entire mealtime talking. His Katie would eventually get enough and said, "Doctor, why don't you stop talking and eat?" And he would respond, "Women should repeat the Lord's Prayer before opening their mouths." (*Years before writing this book, Petersen penned a small volume with the wonderful title, Martin Luther had a Wife*).

If there are perfect marriages to be found in Scripture, someone should point them out to me. We project onto the biblical stories of people like Ruth, Abigail and Esther our own fantasies and imaginings, but I expect the reality was a lot less than what we think.

The story of Abigail, found in 1 Samuel 25, is about as romantic as Scripture gives us. But there is a serious downside to it.

After we read, "And so (Abigail) became (David's) wife," in 25:42, we read in the very next verse, "David also married Ahinoam of Jezreel, and the two of them became his wives."

So much for that.

Finally, a couple of points need to be made ...

Christian wives, your marriage is unique because there are no other people in the world exactly like you and your husband. Christian husband, you and your wife are one-of-a-kind. However ...

You would be amazed how much you have in common with every other family in church. Even the ones who seem to have it all together have their own struggles, battles, temptations, and failures.

I've addressed this mostly to ministers and their wives—as most everything on this website is devoted to church leaders—because I know from experience how much frustration they can feel since they are not doing everything they think they should.

You ask, “So, we should just accept a lousy marriage?”

No, absolutely not. But you should drop the perfectionism and cut each other some slack.

Scripture says, “For He knows how we are formed; He remembers that we are dust. (Psalm 103:14, MEV).

The Lord is under no delusions about you and me. He knew He was getting no bargain when He saved us. When we sin, the only one surprised is us.

That's why we make so much of His grace. “That saved a wretch like me.”

A favorite cartoon from years ago lingers in my mind (whereas of mine most have long since been forgotten). In the car are a pastor and wife with two children in the back seat. The wife is speaking: “What would church members think if they knew the pastor's family does not sing choruses in the car on their way

to church?"

You're normal, so relax. It's quite all right to be human.

Do not give up on your marriage. Do not accept a poor relationship as the norm. Keep working at your marriage. Just put your eyes on the Lord, and not on one another.

It was Ruth Bell Graham who said many unhappy husbands and wives expect their spouses to be to them what only Jesus Christ can be.

A point well made.

*After five years as director of missions for the 100 Southern Baptist churches of metro New Orleans, **Joe McKeever** retired on June 1, 2009. These days, he has an office at the First Baptist Church of Kenner, where he's working on three books, and he's trying to accept every speaking/preaching invitation that comes his way.*

For the original article, visit .