

How to Start a Marriage Revolution

In America, one divorce happens every 13 seconds, equating to 6,646 divorces per day and 46,523 divorces per week.

Forty-one percent of first marriages end in divorce; 60 percent of second marriages end in divorce.

Forty-three percent of children growing up in America today are being raised without their fathers.

Half of all American children will witness the breakup of a parent's marriage. Of these children, close to half will also see the breakup of a parent's second marriage.

Sixty-five percent of altar-bound men and women live together before getting married. People who live together prior to getting married are 40 percent more likely to have marriages that end in divorce.

Divorces for couples over 65 years old have doubled since 1980.

The numbers are sobering. Our world is corrupting at an alarming rate. I read those numbers, look at the culture around me, hear the stories of moral failure among church leaders, and everything I see indicates we're living in the last days. The spirit of the anti-Christ is palpable and growing in its manifested intolerance of anything that represents moral and spiritual absolutes, especially traditional Judeo-Christian values.

As the tide of spiritual and moral lawlessness rises, the church is left with a threefold dilemma:

1. How do we stand up for the truth without sounding like homophobic neanderthals?

2. How do we uphold the biblical standard for marriage when divorce is as common among Christians as it is for non-Christians, a growing number of couples in our churches are living together, and a majority of the population is sympathetic to gay marriage?
3. How do we heal the pain and devastation in people in our churches and communities in ways that will effect real change and not just treat the symptoms?

If the church is to be a redemptive force in society and accomplish the mission Jesus gave us to be salt and light, we must learn to understand and address these questions. And at the same time, we need to remember that though the problems around us are extremely real and ominous, our God is powerful—and our gospel is perfect for times like these. I truly believe we can change the world, but it will take a revolution—a marriage revolution!

Back to the Beginning

Solving any problem starts with getting to the root of it—not just treating the symptoms. Tragically, in America we're spending trillions of dollars dealing with the symptoms of the breakdown of marriage: poverty, crime, juvenile delinquency, drug and alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy—just about any major cultural issue. It's time to admit that the root or cause of all of these problems is the breakdown of the traditional family unit—and that the foundation of the family is marriage.

We can spend a lifetime dealing with the symptoms of the problem and never really change anything. And, by the way, I am all for helping hurting people regardless of whether it's a symptom or the root issue. But as we minister mercy to those in need, we must also have a strategy to fix the real problem. Without it, there will never be true transformative change.

Remembering that it was God who created marriage in the first place is essential. Marriage appears first in Genesis 1, and

its creation is detailed in Genesis 2. God created marriage first because it serves as the foundation for every other institution in society, including the church. Ultimately, world history shows us that a society never rises above the level of the health of its marriages and families.

America is a good example. When the American culture honored traditional values and considered marriage to be sacred, the nation thrived and became the greatest on earth. Then the social engineers showed up (they always do). They promised that liberal family laws would free us from the what they deemed were moral shackles that traditional Judeo-Christian morality had placed on society.

That was around 50 years ago. Since then, America has experienced nonstop moral degradation and societal devastation. Now the social engineers are furiously trying to solve the problems their predecessors created with more liberal laws and by spending trillions of dollars treating nothing but symptoms. It's like trying to solve the problem of a hole in the ground by ordering more shovels.

Unfortunately, I see many denominations and churches mirroring the social engineers. In the midst of our culture's moral upheaval and in the name of political correctness, a growing number of pastors and church leaders are abandoning the Bible as they resign themselves to a lifetime of spiritual symptom solving. I guess they believe that by appeasing and befriending the problem, somehow they can solve it. They couldn't be more wrong.

God created marriage as the foundation of society—period. There is no plan B. Marriage reflects His nature and perpetuates the values and virtues of His Kingdom generationally. I've seen that even when unbelievers are married in a traditional union, it causes them to act in a manner consistent with the character of God and the values of His kingdom, such as fidelity, commitment, sacrifice, service

and love.

As a leader in God's church, remember that He has authorized and empowered you to make disciples and transform culture. You don't have to give in or give up. By focusing on the problem (making the main thing the main thing), you and your church have the potential to revolutionize our communities, nation and world. We cannot focus on symptoms or secondary issues and make a significant difference culturally. With the exception of the gospel message, the most important message in the world today is marriage. Regardless of the condition of your own marriage or whether or not you feel qualified to teach or minister on this subject, we must reclaim this territory for God and consider it holy ground.

From here, the marriage revolution begins. To ensure victory, as church leaders we need to focus our thoughts and efforts on three things:

1. We must wake up to the devil's schemes. As I said earlier, God created marriage as society's first and essential foundation. It's recorded in the first two chapters of Genesis. But then in the third chapter, Satan appears as a serpent to tempt Adam and Eve. We commonly refer to their sin as the "fall of man."

Let me challenge that concept. Genesis 2 records that Adam ("man") was created before Eve. In fact, Adam named all of the animals on the earth before Eve was created, and that had to have taken a while. I find it interesting that before God breathed life into Eve, the enemy never tempted Adam when he was alone. If he had, we could refer to that as the "fall of man." Instead, the devil waited to attack until Eve—and therefore marriage—was created. Evidently, he knew Adam was no real threat on his own. But something changed when Eve showed up. *Then* Satan seduced them to sin. It wasn't just the fall of man. It was the fall of marriage—a strategic attack designed to divide them and to neutralize their potential as a married

couple.

You see, the devil is a strategist. He knows that if he can destroy marriage, he has by default destroyed society. Broken marriages result in broken men, women and children. They cause broken churches, schools, financial institutions and governments. All the devil has to do to win is attack marriage successfully—game, set, match. After the fall of marriage in Genesis 3, look at what happens to the world. Adam and Eve start a family that proves to be highly dysfunctional. By Genesis 6, the earth is full of rampant violence and immorality, just like our world today.

Fighting the Real Enemy

But let's look at this in a different way. If the devil can break down society by attacking marriage, then what happens if we leverage the authority and revelation God has entrusted to us to reclaim and restore the institution of marriage? In a word, *revolution*! We can reverse the curse and truly restore individuals and institutions to their God-created purpose. I truly believe that healthy marriage is a game-changer for the world.

But to effect change, we *must* wake up and become strategic. We've spent too much time reeling from the problems of our society as we blame the government, Hollywood or someone else, when in truth we are not wrestling against flesh and blood. People are not the problem. This is a spiritual battle against Satan and his forces. We have been empowered by God to fight and win this war!

And we must be prepared, knowing that at some point every marriage will come under spiritual attack, especially the marriages of pastors and church leaders. You can expect to face temptation in your marriage because again, Satan is a strategist. He places a high priority on destroying church leaders' marriages. He knows that when our own marriages are

suffering, we won't preach about marriage because we feel unqualified to lead in that area. He knows that if he can destroy our marriages, he can demoralize church members and discredit the work of Christ in the world. To date, he has been highly effective in that area. Sadly, the past and current failures of pastors' marriages are why a growing number of people are leaving the church or not showing up in the first place.

It's time for us to open our eyes and fight the real enemy, remembering that Satan's stealth approach makes him most effective. Think about it: To tempt Eve, he took the form of a serpent. Serpents are dangerous, in part because they blend into their environment. By the time they strike, it's too late. When the devil attacks our marriages, typically by the agency of demonic spirits, he doesn't appear as the devil. He simply slithers up and begins his mind games, whispering thoughts of temptation, deception, accusation, confusion, fear and so on.

Chapter 10 of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians tells us: "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled" (2 Cor. 10:3-6).

The battlefield of marriage is our thoughts, our minds. Consequently, we have to learn to take our thoughts captive as well as train those we lead to read, believe and meditate on God's Word, specifically on what Scripture says about marriage. The sword of the Spirit easily vanquishes the devil's every attack.

And we must learn to expose Satan's lies as he takes advantage

of our every weakness, failure, fallen desire and life disappointment. The devil and his minions are always up to no good, but when we're going through difficulties in life and marriage, they are especially busy. At those times, it's vital that we're especially vigilant and accountable. We all struggle in marriage; we should never be ashamed of that. It's *how* we struggle that determines if we will succeed or fail.

Marriage is the foundation of society, and the Word of God is the foundation of marriage. Our revolution begins when we put on the helmet of salvation and pick up the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit.

2. We must stand up to the deception of our culture with the truth of God's Word. I've never before seen the church and its leaders so paralyzed and timid on an issue than they are with homosexuality and gay marriage. To a large degree, the same thing is true with the entire issue of sexual morality, cohabitation and the biblical definition of marriage. As I mentioned earlier, one of the dilemmas facing us today as church leaders is how we can take a stand without sounding legalistic and hateful. The answer is actually very simple, exemplified in the greatest revolutionary in the history of the world: Jesus Christ.

Jesus came to a broken world just like ours and started a spiritual and cultural revolution that continues today. How did He do it? Thankfully, we have the playbook: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

The word *glory* basically means what you're famous for, your premiere attributes. Jesus came to redeem the world from sin, and to do so He used grace and truth. It is His nature to show both attributes. But He was also full of grace and truth because hate and lies broke the world. Only grace and truth

could fix it. You cannot separate the two. One of the church's greatest failures today is choosing to focus on either grace or truth. The imbalance is deadly. Grace without truth is meaningless, just as truth without grace is mean-spirited. They must work together.

And grace must go first because everything God does must be based out of compassion. You'll never reach, or desire to reach, a person you do not love. As you look at our broken world and the broken people in it, go beyond their behavior and realize they're precious in God's sight. Realize that much of what they do isn't intentionally bad. A lot of the sin in people's lives happens simply because they don't know any better. They're just trying to find a way to medicate their inner emptiness and pain.

It can't be overstated: Ensure that everything you say and do is birthed out of compassion and grace.

But then comes truth. Without truth, grace becomes an enabler, allowing us to stay the same. Truth doesn't mean law. Rather, truth is the knowledge that sets us free to live as God designed. Grace tells us the good news that we are loved by God without merit. Truth tells us the good news that God has a plan for our lives to make us successful and fulfilled.

I love gays. I love people who are cohabiting, who are sexually immoral like I was before I received Christ. But I love them too much to agree with them. They are not living in truth. And regardless of what they think about me or whether or not they will listen to me, I will lovingly stand for truth according to Jesus' example. But my motivation is love for them and our society. I believe a person who tells you what you *need* to hear demonstrates greater love than someone who tells you what you *want* to hear.

3. We must speak up about marriage in our churches. Many churches have more divorce recovery ministries than ministries

that build and support marriage. I believe in helping people who are hurting and recovering from divorce, but we must be marriage-building churches first. We must preach and teach about it, making marriage a prioritized, funded and featured part of the life and ministries of our churches. Virtually every healthy and growing church I know of is a marriage-building church. If you are a preacher or teacher, you might not feel qualified to speak about marriage for some reason. That's pretty common. Never before have more resources been available to help leaders who want to prioritize marriage ministry and become marriage builders.

Throughout the July-August print issue of *Ministry Today*, we'll feature resources, ideas and stories to inspire and help you improve both your own marriage and your church's ministry to engaged and married couples. I hope you'll be encouraged and blessed through what these writers have contributed to help you and your church grow. I also hope you'll take up the cause of marriage at this critical time. May God help us as we raise the banner of marriage and recommit to fulfilling Christ's commission to preach the gospel to every creature and make disciples to the ends of the earth. Let the revolution begin!

Jimmy Evans knows firsthand that no marriage is hopeless. The first few years of his and wife Karen's marriage almost ended in divorce. Only by applying the principles their international ministry MarriageToday teaches were they able to save their relationship. Today, after 40 years together, they understand that no matter how bleak a marriage may appear, every couple has a 100 percent chance of success in marriage.

Since founding MarriageToday in 1994, the couple has encouraged and coached countless couples. With more than 50 percent of unions ending in divorce, they are committed to restoring the dream of marriage in America. Currently, he and Karen divide their time between Amarillo, Texas, where he

serves as senior elder of Trinity Fellowship, and Dallas, the location of MarriageToday's headquarters.