

**GOD IN THE MARITAL TRIANGLE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF  
THE INFLUENCE OF CHRISTIAN FAITH IN THE MARRIAGE  
RELATIONSHIP**

by

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study examined the experience of married Christian men and women and sought to gain a richly detailed and deeper understanding of how their faith has influenced their marriages. Current qualitative literature on this phenomenon is scarce and the intent was to create a personal and useful understanding of Christian marital life. Five men and five women who were married for five years or more to a Christian spouse, and who identified themselves as practicing Christians (defined here as ones who believed in the God of the Bible and regularly participated in prayer, Bible reading, and church attendance), participated in an in-depth interview. They answered the question, “According to your personal experience, how has your Christian faith influenced your marriage and your relationship with your spouse?” From their experiences, 13 major common themes and 48 sub-themes emerged. The themes were: Spiritual Leading in Choosing A Spouse; A Spiritual Understanding of the Origin and Design of Marriage; A Spiritual Experience of God Being an Active Participant in the Marriage; A Spiritual Understanding and Experience of Love; A Spiritual Understanding and Experience of Sexuality; Spiritual Resources and Support That Enhance Marital Satisfaction; Shared Spiritual Foundations Regarding Values and Life Philosophy; Shared Spiritual Applications in Finances and Parenting; Shared Faith Rituals and Activities Promote Deeper Intimacy; Spiritual Components of Conflict Resolution; Spiritual and Faith Challenges to the Marital Relationship; Personal Faith Positively Affects the Marriage Relationship; and Spiritual Gratitude for Spouse. These themes were converged into a common story. The participants confirmed validity in follow-up interviews; an outside reader confirmed reliability of theme categorization. Research results were discussed in light of existing literature and themes revealed for the first time in literature were

examined. Themes of: Spiritual Leading in Choosing a Spouse, A Spiritual Experience of God Being an Active Participant in Marriage, A Spiritual Understanding and Experience of Love, Spiritual and Faith Challenges to the Marital Relationship, and Spiritual Gratitude for Spouse have not been discussed previously. Other themes that have been mentioned in prior research were confirmed in this study. Recommendations for further research and implications for counselling were included.

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*1John 4:11*

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Though marriage has undergone many changes in the past centuries, and though divorce rates increased dramatically during the twentieth century (Alberta Report, 1995; Grier, 1996; Statistics Canada, 2000)<sup>1</sup>, the institution of marriage continues to exist. Various relationships and variables in marriage have been studied over several decades in order to come to a deeper understanding of how one's religious beliefs, or lack thereof, impact the marital relationship.

Research has examined how religion influences many areas of marriage and family life, including premarital cohabitation rates, marriage rates, communication style, divorce rates, fertility, female employment, sexuality, gender roles, marital reconciliation, marital happiness, marital stability, and adjustment to marriage. Not all of these areas have been studied to the same degree. Researchers have tended to focus their studies on the effect that religion has on marital satisfaction, marital stability, marital adjustment and demographic variables (such divorce rate, fertility rate, use of contraception, etc.)<sup>2</sup>

Some research has found that religious homogamy between spouses is associated with higher marital stability, marital satisfaction, and marital quality (Glenn, 1984; Heaton, 1982; Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993; Ortega, Whitt & William, 1988;). Religiosity (as measured here by church activity and church attendance) also contributes to marital satisfaction (Burchinal, 1957; Dudley & Kosinski, 1990; Hunt & King, 1978; Wilson & Filsinger, 1984, 1986). Studies from the past two decades have shown that spirituality and

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<sup>1</sup> As of 1996, the number of US residents who are currently divorced more than quadrupled since 1970, from about 4 million to 17 million. Divorced people make up 39 percent of the adult population, up from 28 percent 26 years ago. In Canada (1995), there are 38.3 divorce for every 100 marriages (up from 18.6 25 years ago). In Canada, in 2000, there were 156,038 marriages and 70,292 divorces.

<sup>2</sup> For example, research has been conducted by Anothy, M. J. (1993); Bumpass & Sweet J. (1972); Filsinger, E. E., Wilson, M. R. (1984); Wineberg, H. (1994)

intrinsic faith are also related to higher marital intimacy and satisfaction (Anthony 1993; Giblin, 1996, 1997; Hatch, James & Schumm, 1986; Robinson, 1994; Roth, 1988).

Research incorporates different understandings of spirituality and religiosity. Although these terms used to be considered as referring to the same idea, these definitions are changing (Giblin, 1996). For some, “spirituality” is seen as being an individual, flexible, and relational faith, while “religiosity” evokes thoughts of rigid and exclusive belief systems (Giblin). For this study, the researcher has chosen to draw from Giblin’s (1997) definition of spirituality and Allport’s (Dudley & Kosinski, 1990) understanding of religiosity.

Giblin (1997) understands spirituality as “the experience of seeking to make meaning of one’s life and to sense the connectedness and interconnectedness across life as informed by relationship with the divine” (p. 321). He also adds that spirituality is based on a continuum, “ranging from natural spirituality (e.g. a fundamental quest for self-transcendence and surrender)...to relationship with the transcendent—Jesus, Yahweh, Buddha” (p. 321 to 322). Spirituality is understood as an inclusive dimension of an individual’s life that influences emotions, thoughts and behaviours of individuals. According to Giblin (1997), all types of spirituality also include core aspects such as love, forgiveness, commitment to journey, and hope.

Allport understood religion as being extrinsically or intrinsically oriented (Dudley & Kosinski, 1990). An extrinsic religious orientation is utilitarian and is used to gain social status, solace, and safety. It is based on the satisfaction of personal needs. On the other hand, an intrinsic religious orientation is a more mature faith that involves meaning, motivation, and interest beyond oneself.

This study used the term “practicing Christian”. This phrase was defined as someone who believes in the God of the Bible and who regularly participates in prayer, Bible reading and church attendance. It was hoped that this definition would be simple and palatable to Christians, and would incorporate individuals who have a faith that influences them on a daily basis. As such, “practicing Christian” includes the ideas of Giblin’s (1997) spirituality and Allport’s (Dudley & Kosinski, 1990) intrinsic religion.

The researcher is interested specifically in the influence that Christian beliefs have on marriage interactions. However, research does not always focus on the Christian faith alone. Some research focuses on the differences between Catholics and Protestants, some examines Christian fundamentalists, and other research includes individuals of non-Christian faiths (i.e., Judaism, Mormonism, Buddhism). All research that incorporates at least some aspect of Christian faith will be deemed relevant to this thesis.

A limitation of the current body of literature on faith and marriage is that the majority of research has been quantitative in nature. Few qualitative studies have been done on how Christianity specifically impacts the way that a husband and wife relate to each other. Current research is unable to provide a reason or explanation for why Christian faith seems to have a positive effect on marriage. It is known that greater “religiosity” has an effect on marriage, but how exactly does this play itself out in the daily interactions between husband and wife? Researchers in the field agree that there is a great need to study these missing links, and to come to an understanding of why and how the Christian faith of husbands and wives effects their relationship (Booth & Johnson 1995; Giblin, 1997; Hatch et al., 1986; Thomas & Cornwall, 1990).

This research project was qualitative in nature and sought to discover how faith in Christ influenced the marriage relationship. Five males and five females, who were self-identified practising Christians and were married for a minimum of five years to a Christian, were invited to participate in a phenomenological interview. They were asked to share their answer, based on their own personal experience, to the question, “How has your Christian faith influenced your marriage and your relationship with your spouse?”

The possible implications of the findings are exciting to contemplate. As our society becomes less based on traditional Christian values, more counsellors and psychologists are unfamiliar with the Christian faith and the uniqueness of a Christian marriage. The results from this study may help non-Christian counsellors to better understand the spiritual relationship between a Christian husband and wife, and therefore, be better equipped to counsel them. This study may help others to know more of the Christian faith and how it changes the lives of believers who are married.

This study may also be beneficial to Christian counsellors and pastors. It may provide a deeper and richer understanding of how the psychological and spiritual dynamics of Christian marriage interact. Results could reveal the ways that faith can be used both positively and negatively in a Christian marriage (i.e., use faith positively to help forgive spouse; use faith or religious activities as an excuse for not participating wholly in the marriage). Thus, with this additional knowledge, Christian professionals will be able to more competently counsel Christian spouses who are experiencing marital challenges.

The results of this study may also be used to show which aspects of faith are important in marriage. This knowledge could be included in pre-marital counselling and

could potentially prevent problems (that are unique to Christian marriages) from occurring. Such information could also be used for marriage enhancement purposes.

Results that show positive aspects of Christian marriage could also support the Biblical mandate that Christians should only marry other believers.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this research review is to determine how religious faith influences the actual relationship between the husband and wife. The impact of religion on demographic variables therefore, will not be part of this review. Neither will this research review include the impact of beliefs on the premarital relationship or on divorce. It will not include non-psychological behaviours within the marriage such as fertility or female employment. The researcher is most interested in learning how the religious beliefs of a husband and wife influence their daily interactions and relationship with one another, and how these impact the quality of their relationship.

## Changes in the Institution of Marriage

The institution of marriage has been embraced by many religious faiths (i.e. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism). Although the rates of premarital cohabitation and divorce have increased dramatically in the past century (Grier, 1996; Alberta Report, 1995; Statistics Canada, 2000), couples are still choosing to marry. The idea of marriage still appeals to some men and women today, yet what marriage looks like has changed dramatically throughout history.

The past 300 years in North America have held momentous change for marriage. During the Colonial period in America, marriage was a relationship based mostly on economic and social factors. Romantic love and friendship were not valued in marriage; in fact, romance was often frowned upon (Wright, 1998). Marriages of this time period were patriarchal in structure and emphasized the need to uphold one's marital obligations regardless of personal emotions or feelings.

Marriage changed during the Victorian era when eros and romance were emphasized (Wright, 1998). Companionship and emotional intimacy were seen as ideals to strive for in both the courtship and marital relationship.

In the early 1900s, life continued to revolve around marriage and the family. People married at a young age and had large families (often of five to ten children) (Worthington, Shortz & McCullough, 1993). Almost all of life and society was based on the family and marital relationship.

The modern North American marriage is somewhat different. Marriages today are more emotionally intense and interdependent than ever before (Levinger & Houston, 1990). They are also quite different because women are now in the labour force and are economically independent. Because of this, couples tend to be more egalitarian and gender roles are more flexible than traditional. As well, modern life no longer revolves around the family. Individuals may choose to marry or not, may or may not bear children, and may also divorce. One also has to consider that the average life span has changed drastically in the last hundred years. In 1900, the average life expectancy was approximately 45 years; today, it is almost 80 years (Worthington et al., 1993). All these changes have influenced the structure and character of marriage.

### Types of Marriages

Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1996), describe the modern marriage as being either traditional or therapeutic. The traditional marriage is the relationship found more often within Protestant couples. In this type of marriage, gender roles tend to be traditional (i.e., the husband works out of the home and the wife is a homemaker) and the relationship is more patriarchal. Both wife and husband are

committed to the relationship as well as to their Christian faith. Qualities such as sacrificial love, faith, duty, and conservative values, play a large part in the marriage. The therapeutic marriage is the relationship which secular couples tend to favour. It is based upon values such as self-growth, individualism, and need gratification. Bellah et al. even believe that therapeutic marriages tend to not be as stable or lasting.

Cancian (1987) identifies a third type of modern marriage, the “interdependent” marriage. This relationship is described as ideal because it encompasses gender role flexibility and self-development, along with commitment to the marriage and dependence on one other. There does not seem to be a term coined yet for a marriage that is a combination of the ideals of both traditional and interdependent marriage. Perhaps such relationships exist (where Christianity is integrated with equality and self-development), yet they apparently have not yet been studied or discovered.

Individuals of religious faith, along with the rest of society, are divorcing at higher rates<sup>3</sup>. Approximations are that one of every two first marriages will end in divorce. Yet despite these high statistics, marriage has not become obsolete. In fact, 80% of divorced individuals will remarry within five years of their divorce (Worthington et al., 1993). There appears to be a great need to not only continue to study and research marriage relationships, but to also study how Christian faith influences marriages today.

### Religious Homogamy and Marital Satisfaction

Through the decades, several terms for marital satisfaction have been used.

Phrases such as marital happiness, marital stability, marital quality, marital adjustment, and marital cohesiveness are generally referring to the same concept (Anthony, 1993). A

<sup>3</sup> Mormons tend to have the lowest rate of divorce, followed by Catholics and then Protestants (Heaton & Goodman, 1985). Those with no religious affiliation have the highest rate of marital dissolution (Call & Heaton, 1997).

commonly used definition for marital satisfaction is the one created by Spanier and Cole (Spanier, 1976). Their concept of marital quality includes: the degree of bothersome marital differences, interspousal tensions and personal anxiety, marital satisfaction, dyadic cohesion, and consensus on matters important to the marriage.

Various studies have been done linking religious homogamy and marital satisfaction. For the most part, research has supported the idea that couples with similar religious beliefs will experience greater marital satisfaction (Glenn, 1984; Heaton, 1982). One of the underlying assumptions is that marriage partners who share similar values, norms, and beliefs, will adjust easier to one another, and have less conflict in their relationship (Ortega et al., 1988) resulting in more permanent unions. Common beliefs and values will assist spouses when making decisions about the raising of children, education, allocation of money, and leisure activities. Couples who share the same faith may have a more common social network of friends, family, and religious advisors (Heaton, 1990). This social network may aid couples in working through their problems, and thus promote marital stability. As well, shared religiosity between husband and wife increases marital companionship and intimacy (Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993). When spouses are similar in religious beliefs, church attendance and faith can provide a foundation for family values and commitment. These research findings suggests that complementary religious beliefs are an ideal between marriage partners.

Religious homogamy has been studied various ways, according to the way each researcher has defined religious homogamy and religious heterogamy. Most commonly, homogamous and heterogamous marriages have been studied and classified according to three categories: Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Jewish. Using these divisions, studies

have showed that religiously homogamous marriages are more stable than heterogamous, or interfaith marriages (Burchinal & Chancellor, 1963; Bumpass & Sweet, 1972; Monahan & Kephart, 1954). Lehrer and Chiswick (1993) report that not only is religious homogamy related to marital stability, but also that religious compatibility between husband and wife when they are first married also has a large impact on marital stability.

Studies have also shown that religiously homogamous marriages report greater marital happiness (Alston, McIntosh & Wright, 1976; Glenn, 1982). Glenn (1982) found that husbands in particular, have higher marital satisfaction when the relationship is homogamous, but this finding was not true for wives.

Heterogamous marriages, when defined as denominationally different Protestant couples, have not been researched to the same degree. In general, there is little evidence that individuals who marry within their denomination have different rates of marital stability, from those who marry across denominations (Ortega et al., 1988).

There are still many unknowns about religious homogamy and marital success. For example, why is homogamy linked with higher marital satisfaction? Perhaps religious homogamy between couples allows them to participate in religious activities together, thus increasing marital satisfaction. It is possible that it is higher rates of religious activity, rather than homogamy alone, that contributes to higher marital satisfaction (Heaton, 1984). It is also not known how the degree of one's spirituality affects religious homogamy and marital happiness. For example, what occurs in a marriage where both individuals are of the same faith and yet this faith does not daily impact their lives? Do the positive effects of religious homogamy still apply?

Heaton (1984) researched the link between homogamy, church attendance, presence of children, and marital satisfaction. He predicted that the religious orientation of heterogamous marriages would create marital conflict and thus contribute to lower levels of satisfaction. Religious involvement (as measured by frequency of church attendance) was tested to see if heterogamy only had a negative effect on marital satisfaction when religious participation was high. Overall, marital satisfaction was higher in homogamous marriages. When the presence of children was accounted for, the finding still remained the same. Thus, disagreement over the religion of children in heterogamous marriages does not seem to contribute to lower marital satisfaction. Church attendance had a positive relationship with marital satisfaction; however, once attendance is taken into account, homogamy seems to have little effect on the marriage.

Ortega et al. (1988) investigated marital happiness and the degree of heterogamy in marriage. Rather than examining the broad differences between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, Ortega et al. grouped individuals into six specific religious categories, based on differences in doctrine: Baptist, Calvinist, Catholic, Fundamentalist, Lutheran, and Methodist. Subjects were measured as to the amount of “religious difference” between the spouses. Marital happiness was measured through a simple question of whether ones marriage could be described as very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy.

The findings of Ortega et al. (1988) showed that there was no significant difference in marital happiness among Catholic-Catholic marriages, Protestant-Protestant marriages, and Catholic-Protestant marriages. This was an unexpected result. However, Protestants who married an individual of a similar denomination showed higher marriage

happiness than Protestants who married across denominations. Overall, there was a significant association between religious heterogamy and lower marital happiness.

Heaton and Pratt (1990) studied religious homogamy with a different measure. They compared the effects of denominational affiliation, church attendance, and belief in the Bible as having answers to modern problems, on marital satisfaction. Marital stability and marital satisfaction were measured via Likert scale responses. Heaton and Pratt found that belonging to a conservative or non-denominational Protestant group was related to higher marital satisfaction and stability (the one exception was Baptists). In general, couples of the same denominational faith were more likely to have happy and stable marriages than couples who were of different denominational faiths. As well, belief that the Bible has the solution to important problems, and more frequent church attendance, were positively associated with marital satisfaction and stability. Religious homogamy and similar rates of church attendance were also significantly related to marital happiness and stability. Religious affiliation was the variable most strongly related to marital success, rather than variables of church attendance or similar beliefs about the Bible. This seems to suggest that it is the cultural and social aspects of faith rather than theological beliefs that have the greatest positive impact on the marriage relationship.

Chi and Houseknecht (1985) conducted a somewhat controversial study on Protestant Fundamentalists and marital success. They compared Fundamentalists with other Protestants, and found that Fundamentalists reported a higher marital dissolution rate. However, there was no difference between Fundamentalists and non-Fundamentalist Protestants or Catholics in terms of marital satisfaction. As long as there were religiously homogamous marriages, there were no differences in marital satisfaction among

Fundamentalists, non-Fundamentalists, and Catholics. An interesting finding was that in marriages where one spouse is a Fundamentalist and the other is not, there are lower levels of marital satisfaction. Chi and Houseknecht maintained that culture conflict, poor boundary maintenance, and lack of normative integration are often found among Fundamentalists, and that it is these variables that lead to decreased marital satisfaction. Perhaps beliefs in the submission of the wife and traditional sex role patterns, which are more characteristic of Fundamentalists, could lead to conflict and disharmony in a heterogamous marriage where one spouse is a Fundamentalist. Chi and Houseknecht also examined to see if religious conformists or religious converts have different rates of marital dissolution. The results indicated that conversion could indeed be a factor in marital dissolution.

Schumm and Obiorah (1989) and Schumm, Jeong, and Silliman (1990) conducted research and had outcomes that contradicted the findings of Chi and Houseknecht (1985). Schumm and Obiorah studied 174 protestant and Catholic wives. Marital quality was measured using sections from the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale, the Marital Communication Inventory, and Barrett-Lennard's Relationship Inventory. Frequency of church attendance and self-identification as a Fundamentalist, Evangelical, or charismatic Christian was used to measure religious identity. Schumm and Obiorah found that no relationship existed between conservative religious identification and marital quality.

Schumm, Jeong, and Silliman (1990) also found results that negated those of Chi and Houseknecht (1985). Forty-four Protestant couples were studied and no significant relationship was found between fundamentalism and marital quality. However, among the Protestants who attended church regularly, there seemed to be higher scores for

apprehension about marital communication and aversive communication. The authors hypothesized that perhaps fundamentalism was related to a more rigid and legalistic communication style or higher expectations of one's spouse. More research would need to be done to confirm or disprove this theory.

The additional dimension of how religious affiliation affects marital dependency, was examined by Wilson and Musick (1996). Marital dependency was described as how large a stake a spouse has in his/her marriage, and how dependent spouses are on the marriage to achieve their major life goals. Dependency is also related to exchange theory; exchange theory purports that relationships are rewarding as long as benefits received are greater than the costs. Marital dependency involves the idea that the less attractive alternatives outside the marriage, the higher the marital dependency. As well, the longer one has been married (and thus the more one has invested into the relationship) the more dependent one is. Dependency also increases when there are children involved. Marital dependency is quite different from marital satisfaction and is not to be associated with the idea of an unhealthy, co-dependent relationship.

Wilson and Musick (1996) found a number of interesting results: religious individuals are more dependent on their marriage than non-religious individuals; individuals who belong to a conservative Protestant denomination are more dependent than those belonging to more liberal Protestant denominations; involvement in a church and frequent church attendance increases marital dependency; and denominational homogamy increases dependence. In general, a positive relationship was found between religious beliefs and practices, and marital dependency.

For the most part, research supports the idea that spouses who are religiously homogamous have a higher rate of marital satisfaction than couples who are religiously heterogamous (Glenn, 1982, Heaton, 1984; Heaton & Pratt, 1990). Research has also shown that religiously homogamous couples tend to have “a higher stake” invested in the marriage, and are more dependent on the marriage to achieve major life goals (Wilson & Musick, 1996). Therefore, couples who are of the same faith and attend the same church, appear to have higher levels of marital satisfaction and marital investment.

### Religiosity and Marital Satisfaction

In 1978 Hunt and King did the first major study that linked religious beliefs with the quality of marriage. Sixty-four married couples were tested for their religiosity (using scales of King & Hunt, 1972, and LAM by Hunt, 1972) and their marital success. Satisfaction, adjustment, and happiness were measured using the Locke-Wallace Adjustment Scale (1959) and measures from Burgess and Wallin (1953). It was not specified as to what religious affiliation the subjects had.

The results of the study by Hunt and King (1978) showed that there was a positive relationship between the quality of marriage and the religiosity of the spouses. For both husbands and wives, higher scores of marital adjustment and happiness were positively related to measures of Creedal Assent, Involvement in Church Organizational Activities, Orientation to Growth & Striving, Greater Tolerance of Others, and Religious Agreement between the spouses. Extrinsic Religious motivation was also positively related to marital happiness for both husbands and wives. These results suggest that religious commitment to beliefs and the effort involved in living out these beliefs, contributes to greater marital satisfaction. However, it is not known whether individuals commit themselves to the

above values because of intrinsic beliefs, or because they have been conditioned or told to accept these values by religious institutions.

In an early study, Burchinal (1957) set out to test whether church attendance was related to marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction was measured using scales adapted from the Burgess and Wallin marriage success indexes. Approximately 500 married individuals were given the marital satisfaction questionnaire during a home interview. Husbands and wives were also asked about their church membership status and frequency of church attendance. The results did not show clear evidence to support the hypothesis. Although marital satisfaction scores for husbands and wives who attended church or were church members were higher than the scores of individuals who were not church members or did not attend church, they were not statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Men who were church members scored significantly higher on marital satisfaction than men who were not church members; although this trend was also true for wives, it was not statistically significant for the women.

A weakness of this Burchinal's (1957) study is that religiosity was defined and measured somewhat ineffectively. Membership in a church does not necessarily indicate that an individual has a personal faith life that would impact his/her daily marital life. As well, the reliability and validity of the Burgess and Wallin marriage success indexes is not known.

Later studies measured religiosity in better ways. Dudley and Kosinski (1990) tested the relationship between several religious dimensions and the marital satisfaction of 228 Seventh Day Adventists. Marital satisfaction was again measured using Locke-Wallace Short Marital Adjustment Test. Four religious variables (Creedal Assent,

Ritualism, Religious Experience, and Importance of Religious Faith) were measured. The Validated Intrinsic Religious Motivation Scale (Hoge, 1972, as cited in Dudley & Kosinski, 1990) was used to measure extrinsic versus intrinsic faith, and a religious scale made by Roof Maturity Scale (Dudley & Cruise, as cited in Dudley & Kosinski, 1990) tested immature versus mature faith. Religiosity was thus measured in ways other than mere church attendance or affiliation. Dudley and Kosinski hypothesized that Allport's theory on intrinsic versus extrinsic religious orientation is critical in its impact on marital satisfaction.<sup>4</sup> They wanted to test the idea that it is intrinsic faith that correlates with positive marriage relationships.

Religiosity variables (Dudley & Kosinski, 1990) that significantly correlated with marital satisfaction were: Intrinsic Orientation, Private and Public Rituals, Religious Experience, Salience, Congruence, and Family Worship. Creedal Assent, Frequency of Church Attendance, Income Given to Religious Causes, and Frequency of Bible Study, were religious variables that were not significantly correlated to marital satisfaction.

This study (Dudley & Kosinski, 1990) also included an optional free response question that asked participants what effect religion had on their marriage relationship. This qualitative part of the study showed that faith helped the individuals in their marriages because their faith helped them to think of the needs of others, be more loving,

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<sup>4</sup> As mentioned in the Introduction, Allport divided religion into two types, extrinsic and intrinsic religion. Extrinsic religion is utilitarian and is used to gain social status, solace, and safety. It is based on the satisfaction of personal needs. On the other hand, intrinsic religion involves a faith that fills all aspects of a meaning, motivation, and interest beyond oneself. Individuals having an intrinsic faith are considered spiritually mature by Allport.

be respectful, and to resolve conflicts. This again suggests that it is the intrinsic experience of religion that helps marriages to be more satisfying.

Filsinger and Wilson (1984) contributed to the body of research in religiosity and marital adjustment. Using the DeJong,-Faulkner-Warland Religiosity Scale (which follows the theoretical understanding of Glock)<sup>5</sup> and the DAS to measure marital adjustment, they tested 208 Protestant couples. They also included questions on socio-economic status and family development. Religiosity was the strongest predictor of marital adjustment. A significant positive relationship existed between the two variables (even when the social desirability of answers was controlled).

In 1986 Wilson and Filsinger conducted another study. Using the same measures as they did in 1984 they measured the religiosity of 190 married, Protestant couples. Wilson and Filsinger found that ritualism, religious experience, and religious belief are all related to marital adjustment. Religiosity affected all aspects of a couple's marriage, except for affectional expression. This is an important study because it demonstrates that personal religious aspects of the husband and wife have an impact on the marriage relationship.

Sullivan (2001) examined the longitudinal effect of religiosity and marital functioning in newlywed couples. Sullivan found that as religiosity increased, spouses are less likely to see divorce as an option, have a higher commitment to the marriage, and are more willing to seek help in time of relationship difficulties. She found that religiosity only increases marital satisfaction of psychologically healthy husbands.

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<sup>5</sup> Glock described religious commitment as being made of five components: ideological (beliefs); ritualistic (practice); experiential (religious feeling); intellectual (knowledge of scripture and theology); and consequential (how religion affects ones life). Glock's definition of religiosity is commonly known, and is supported by most research in the area.

In summary, research shows that commitment to religious beliefs and having an intrinsic oriented faith are related to higher rates of marital satisfaction (Dudley & Kosinski, 1990; Hunt & King, 1978; Sullivan, 2001). As well, Filsinger & Wilson (1984, 1986) have shown that religious beliefs and religious experience are positively related to marital adjustment. It seems to be that intrinsic faith and marriage are positively related.

### Spirituality and Marital Satisfaction

In 1996 Paul Gibling wrote an article that highlighted the prominence that “spirituality” rather than religion, plays in modern society and in current marital relationships. While he acknowledged that spirituality and religion used to be synonymous words, he pointed out that a modern day distinction exists between the two. For many people, religion has become connected with ideas of exclusive, rigid, hierarchical, and fundamentalist beliefs rather than how people live out their religious beliefs. Religion has come to be associated with cognitive ideas rather than inner meaning, and is often remembered by adults as a negative church experience. On the contrary, spirituality is ideally a flexible, meaningful, individual belief system that allows for intellectual growth and reflection, involves community experiences and relationships, and includes moral accountability. Spirituality includes concepts such as love, forgiveness, journey, failure, intimacy, and hope. It is different from religion in that there are no specific dogmas, institutions, or hierarchical structures associated with it. Spirituality includes natural spirituality (a journey of seeking self transcendence), religious spirituality (having a relationship with a power or being in order to experience self-transcendence), as well as the spirituality associated with specific faith traditions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism.

Leaning on a definition of spirituality by Hinterkopf (1994), Giblin (1996) defined spirituality as involving four dimensions: feelings and senses rather than just a cognitive belief system; a transcendent aspect that involves moving towards a more inclusive and broader life perspective, and may or may not include a God or higher power; finding and receiving meaning; leads to an increased awareness of self and others, personal growth, energy, and freedom. Spirituality can thus be harmonious with the Christian faith, as well as with other belief systems.

There are several inventories that are used to assess spirituality in individuals and couples. DiBlasio (1988) has created a measure of family religiosity that ranges from no religiosity to absolute religiosity. Ellison (1983) developed the Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS). This scale is made of two sub-scales, Religious Well-Being (measures relationship with God), and Existential Well-Being (measures life purpose and satisfaction). Practitioners and researchers commonly use the SWBS. Another common tool is the Spiritual Experience Index (SEI) that measures spiritual maturity (Genia, 1991). One other spiritual assessment tool is the Spiritual Orientation Inventory (SOI) (Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, & Saunders, 1988).

In 1997 Giblin measured the spirituality of 35 Christian couples (88% were Catholic, 12% Protestant) and the role that it played in couple-satisfaction. Marital satisfaction was tested using ENRICH and an abbreviated version of the Barrett-Lennard Relationship Inventory (RI).<sup>6</sup> Spirituality was measured using the Spiritual Experience Index (SEI), Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS), and a brief questionnaire by Giblin to

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<sup>6</sup> SWBS measures existential well being (life direction and satisfaction) and religious well being (personal relationship with God). SEI measures spiritual maturity.

<sup>7</sup> Giblin's ten-item questionnaire asked about prayer, scripture reading, spiritual reading, church attendance, and church ritual in participants' lives.

measure religious behaviour.<sup>7</sup> In general, Giblin found that there was a positive relationship between spirituality and relationship satisfaction. However, the data was not as clear or concise as he expected. Spirituality scores were significantly related to aspects of marriage such as communication, conflict resolution, sexual relationship, and decision-making. However, couples that most frequently read the Bible, attended church, and prayed did not automatically have the most satisfying marriages.

There were also interesting differences between the sexes (Giblin, 1997). The spirituality of the husbands seemed to have a more direct impact on the marriage. Wives, however, seemed to demonstrate an additional inner quality to their spirituality that was more separate from their marriage than indicated by the husbands. Giblin also found that when asked to choose an image that explained the idea of marital spirituality, men were more likely to choose a triangle image, while women were more inclined to describe a circle. An additional difference between the sexes was found in terms of levels of spirituality. When husbands scored higher than their wives in spirituality, the relationship satisfaction remained high. However when this was reversed and wives scored higher than their husbands, the marital satisfaction was affected.

Another variation on the relationship between religiosity and marital satisfaction was done by Michael Anthony (1993). He chose to measure spiritual maturity using the Religious Orientation Scale (ROS) created by Gordon Allport. This scale is unique in that it identifies four patterns of religious orientation: intrinsic, extrinsic, indiscriminately pro-religious, and indiscriminately anti-religious. Only individuals who fall into the category of intrinsic are considered by Allport to be spiritually mature. Marital satisfaction was measured using Spanier's Dyadic Adjustment Scale, which measures dyadic consensus,

dyadic cohesion, dyadic satisfaction, and expression of affection. Anthony studied 400 married couples that were from conservative Protestant churches (Baptist, Independent, Evangelical Free, and Congregational).

Anthony's results (1993) showed that those who were spiritually mature (intrinsic religious orientation) scored the highest on measures of marital satisfaction. Conversely, those with an extrinsic religious orientation experienced the least marital satisfaction. Individuals who are indiscriminately anti-religious scored second highest on marital satisfaction and those who are indiscriminately pro-religious scored third highest on marital satisfaction.

Anthony (1993) theorized that people with intrinsic faith enjoy happy marriages because such individuals are more selfless and giving. Perhaps the antireligious individuals experience the second highest level of marital satisfaction because they do not feel tied to religious traditions and strict standards. Anthony hypothesizes that perhaps both groups of people live their lives based on strong beliefs, which leads to less internal conflict and thus stronger marriages. Individuals whose religious orientation is somewhat selfish and possibly hypocritical (extrinsic and indiscriminately pro-religious) perhaps also experience these traits in their marriage—which would explain their lower levels of marital satisfaction.

Booth and Johnson (1995) discovered results that were contrary to the above findings. Using a longitudinal (12 year) study of 2,003 married persons, they found that an increase in personal religious activity (which is part of spirituality) does not lead to an increase in marital happiness. Booth and Johnson studied the extent to which changes in religious activity influence marital quality, as well as the extent to which changes in

marital quality influence religiosity. Religiosity was measured using five multiple-choice questions—a rather limited assessment. The questions asked participants about their frequency of Scripture reading, prayer, church attendance, church social activities, and the influence of religious beliefs on daily life. Marital quality was measured using five subscales: marital happiness, marital interaction, marital disagreement, marital problems, and divorce proneness.

The results of Booth and Johnson's (1995) study showed that as religiosity increases, divorce proneness significantly declines. However, changes in religiosity were not found to impact any other area of marital quality. On the other hand, changes in marital interaction and increases in marital happiness seem to increase church attendance. As well, a change in marital happiness seems to increase the influence of religion in daily life (but not vice versa). Overall, there was little support found for the hypothesis that changes in religiosity and marital quality will affect each other. It is plausible that a more detailed measure of religious beliefs would yield different results.

In a study by Snow and Compton (1996) one aspect of religious life that Booth and Johnson (1995) measured—the importance of religion for each spouse—was found to be related to marital satisfaction. The marital satisfaction of 78 Christian fundamentalist couples was measured using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale. Communication was assessed with the Marital Communication Inventory. Self reports measured importance of religion, church attendance, traditional religious beliefs, and marital roles. Results showed that higher ratings of marital satisfaction and satisfaction with marital communication were related to higher reports of the importance of religion in each spouse's life. This was interesting because it was religious importance, and not church membership, that

predicted higher marital satisfaction and higher communication satisfaction. Snow and Compton found that the importance of religion for a spouse increases marital satisfaction by increasing empathy towards the partner, and lowering hostile communication in the marriage.

Hatch, James, and Schumm (1986) took research on spirituality and marriage a step further. They examined two areas: whether spiritual intimacy influences the family directly or through an intervening variable (emotional intimacy), and whether spiritual intimacy operates through individual family members or as a joint effort. Both emotional and spiritual intimacy was measured using Schaefer and Olsons' Pair Inventory, and marital satisfaction was measured via the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale. The Intimacy measures included questions such as, "I feel close to my spouse when we're in worship," and "I think that our perceptions of God are basically the same." Results suggested that religion affects an intervening variable, which in turn influences family and marriage relationships. They also found that joint levels of high spiritual intimacy between couples did not seem to predict emotional intimacy. The only significant effect seemed to occur when the wife viewed her marriage as being low in spiritual intimacy and the husband viewed it as being high; this was associated with the wife reporting a much lower degree of emotional intimacy.<sup>8</sup> However, there was still a positive relationship between spiritual intimacy and emotional intimacy. Due to sampling and measurement limitations, Hatch et al., warn that the results should be interpreted cautiously.

Spiritual well-being has also been studied in relationship to marital adjustment (Roth, 1988). One hundred and forty seven married men and women from ten different

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<sup>8</sup> Hatch et al. suggest that perhaps this finding is evidence to support the Apostle Paul cautioning Christians to avoid being unequally yoked (2 Corinthians 7).

Christian denominations were studied. Spanier's Dyadic Adjustment Scale was used to measure marital adjustment, and SWBS was also utilized (composed of Religious well-being and Existential well-being). Roth found a significantly strong relationship between spiritual well-being and marital adjustment of husbands and wives. All four of the adjustment scales were positively significant for the wives. The Religious well-being scores (part of the SWBS) had the lowest correlation with marital adjustment. Thus one can hypothesize that it is the existential well-being (i.e., an understanding of who I am, where I'm headed, what I need to do), rather than intellectual and cognitive religious beliefs that impact relationships. This supports the hypothesis that it is "lived-out" faith that makes a difference in personal relationships.

Differences were also seen between the sexes (Roth, 1988). Men had the highest correlations between marital adjustment and EWB. Women showed a high correlation then men between SWB and marital adjustment. As well, couples that were married 10–40 years showed the highest correlation to spiritual well-being and marital adjustment then couples married for other lengths of time.

Although the term spirituality was not used in the study, Robinson (1994) found that the degree of personal religious faith and the degree of personal relationship with God that spouses had, impacted greatly on the maintenance, growth, and quality of their marriages. Robinson's study is unique in that it is one of the few qualitative studies that have been done on this topic. Robinson wanted to study couples with strong marriages and find out what they perceived as being strengths of their relationship. She began by recruiting couples that were happily married and had been so for 30 years or more (religion was not a factor used to select couples). The couples were primarily referred to

her by faculty, staff, and students in a department of family relations in a southeastern American university. Fifteen couples were used in the study, and each spouse was interviewed individually for approximately one hour. Religion or religiosity was not included in the original set of questions asked; however, when a subject mentioned faith or religion, probing questions were asked in order to gain deeper understanding.

Robinson (1994) found that almost all of the subjects described their faith as being a great asset in the marriage. Religious orientation, religious involvement, and faith were common themes. Religiosity seemed to also have a positive impact on intimacy, commitment, and communication. Faith also provided the couples with moral guidance, help in resolving conflicts, and facilitated decision making. Spouses also described faith as playing an integral role in emotional support, social support (through church friends and social activities), and spiritual support. Parents who had experienced difficult times with their children (i.e., children running away, legal problems, the death of a child) maintained that their shared belief helped them to get through the crisis. Prayer and reading of scripture also helped couples with moral guidance and decision-making. Quotes that demonstrate the importance of personal faith in marriage include: "...It was our faith in the Lord that kept us faithful to each other"; "...We both turned our son over to God"; "...We were praying together, so it brought us closer together"; "There are a lot of things in Jesus' teaching that help you have a good marriage." (pp. 212, 214).

Robinson's study (1994) brought a lot more insight as to how spirituality and a personal relationship with God add a positive dimension to marriage life. It shed some understanding on how God influences marital success and how a strong religious belief impacts a marriage.

In conclusion, the overall research on spirituality and marriage has been consistent. With the exception of Booth & Johnson (1995), research has demonstrated that spirituality and/or intrinsic faith has a positive relationship with marital satisfaction (Anthony, 1993; Giblin, 1997; Hatch, James & Schumm, 1986; Robinson, 1994; Roth, 1988; Snow & Compton, 1996). Spirituality is positively related to communication, conflict resolution, sexual relationship and decision making (Giblin, 1997). It is also positively related to marital communication (Snow & Compton, 1996) and marital adjustment (Roth, 1988). Anthony (1993) hypothesized that those who are spiritually mature experience greater marital happiness because people with intrinsic faith may be more selfless and giving. Robinson (1994) interviewed 30 happily married couples and found that spouses described their faith as being a great asset in their marriages. The couples revealed that a personal relationship with God helped their marriages in areas such as intimacy, commitment, communication, and decision-making. Research has consistently demonstrated that a meaningful faith and spiritual life of spouses is positively linked to happy marriages.

#### Overall Findings on Religion and Marriage

Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, and Swank (2001) published a significant research project in which they conducted an overarching meta-analysis of research from the 1980s and 1990s that tied religion with marital and parental functioning. Their findings were significant and they found five major trends. Their significant findings about marriage included the following. First, those who attended church or reported an allegiance to a religious denomination had a significantly lower divorce rates than those with no religious affiliation (49% versus 62%). Second, greater individual religiousness is

tied to greater marital commitment. Third, greater personal religiosity is associated with higher levels of couples' communication skills. Fourth, higher personal religiosity was strongly related to greater marital satisfaction. Fifth and lastly, couples that were more religious had better communication skills and stronger conflict resolution skills.

The findings of Mahoney et al. (2001) are valuable. Their research results are a comprehensive picture and summary of what has been affirmed in research on marriage and religion/spirituality. Their findings are a synthesis of the research conclusions portrayed in this literature review; their results clarify and extend the studies mentioned in this review. Overarching findings of Mahoney et al. in the area of faith and marriage are: spouses who are religiously homogamous have a higher rate of marital satisfaction than spouses who are religiously heterogamous; intrinsic faith is positively related to marital satisfaction and marital adjustment; spirituality is positively related to marital satisfaction and related variables such as communication, conflict resolution, decision making, sexual relationship, intimacy, and commitment. In general, intrinsic faith and shared faith between spouses has been demonstrated to have a positive relationship with the quality of marriage.

#### Psychological Explanation

Apart from the explanations and research findings listed above, James R. David (1979) came up with a psychological interpretation of why intrinsic religious beliefs and spirituality have a positive and stabilizing effect on the marital relationship. David (1979) compares the Christian marital triangle (God, wife, husband) with Murray Bowen's (cited in David, 1979) theory of Triangles. For those unfamiliar with this theory, Bowen proposed that the triangle, as a three-person system, is the smallest possible stable

relationship system. Two individuals can co-exist alone for a period of time, until conflict arises. As anxiety is created, the third person is invited into the triangle in order to act as a de-escalating and stabilizing force. The focus is taken off of the dyad and shifted onto the outside person. When one triangle contains too much tension, other triangles become involved and can form many interlocking triangular systems.

David (1979) proposes that the third person in the triangle of a Christian marriage relationship is Christ. Marital stability and conflict can be reduced when one or both partners invite Christ to participate in their relationship. It is best if the couple together developed a relationship with God, rather than just one individual having a relationship with Him (this could create unequal distance in the marriage between the three participants).

There are different mechanisms by which spouses create and grow in their shared beliefs (Butler & Harper, 1994). The language that a couple uses in daily interactions reveals God. The type of questions they ask one another, as well as the solutions they offer reveals their religious beliefs. Homogamous couples often speak of God being in the midst of the marriage, or of offering their marriage up to Him as an instrument to be used (Bulter & Harper). Rituals, ceremonies, and daily patterns can also reflect how God is in the marital triangle. God is kept as an integral part of the triangle when spouses daily engage in activities such as prayer, reading of Scripture, or singing of religious songs. God is also brought into the marriage when couples remember past experiences and create their own history and narrative that include their relationship with God. Over time, the personal stories of the marriage are altered and adapted to fit into the God-couple relationship.

### Why Additional Research is Necessary

Researchers in the past decades have definitely shown an interest in how religion plays a role in the marital relationship. Research has been focused on marital satisfaction, marital quality, and marriage stability. Several decades ago, researchers were interested in religious homogamy/heterogamy and the effect it had on marriages. Researchers then explored how religiosity and church attendance impacts marriage. Recently there has been a trend towards studying the effect that a personal and meaningful faith, or spirituality, has on the husband and wife relationship.

Life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has many individuals searching for deeper meaning in their lives. Giblin (1996) refers to it as being a modern “societal hunger for meaning, values, and transcendence” (p. 2). Psychologists, researchers, and counsellors, have an ethical obligation to study and examine this societal trend, and to find ways in which spirituality can be integrated into marriage counselling sessions.

Research to this point has missed several large areas of study. Although scientists have affirmed that religiosity impacts in a positive way on marriages, it has not been studied how this happens. Parke (2001) acknowledges that while a high proportion of families have religious values, “This topic is rarely represented in the scientific journals devoted to family issues” (p. 555). Parke further shares that much more research is needed in the area of religion and marriage; issues in religious marriages such as marital distress, divorce, and roles in the family remain for the most part, un-researched. Hatch et al. (1986) are among researchers who recognize this and see the need to study how religion specifically affects marriage. Robinson (1994) suggests that new research focus on the relationship between manifestations of religiosity (such as rituals, creeds,

experiences) and their specific consequences for spouses. Thomas and Cornwall (1990) write that research needs to examine what exactly it is about religion that increases marital satisfaction. Other researchers (Roth, 1988; Worthington et al., 1993) agree that exploring the subjective experience of faith in marriage is a needed pursuit. Giblin (1997) best sums up the need for additional research: “The specific manner in which religion interacts with marital and family life—such as communication, conflict resolution, decision making, commitment, sexuality, and parenting—has not been explored empirically” (p. 321).

As well, research has focused on the positive influence of faith on marriages. It is unknown whether or not there are negative implications that faith and spirituality has on the quality of marriages. In Christian marriages, perhaps issues such as submission or traditional gender roles have a negative impact on marriage. This is another area which is lacking in research.

There is also a severe lack of qualitative research. Robinson’s research (1994) is one of the few qualitative studies that has examined the relationship between religious beliefs and marital quality—and her study did not originally set out to study this relationship. There is a need for more qualitative research in order to understand the experience of Christian faith in marriage from the descriptions of those personally involved. Qualitative research can explore how individuals specifically see spirituality affecting their marriage. Qualitative research in this area will provide insights and understanding as to how persons experience God in their marriage.

There is also a need for research that focuses specifically on the impact of spirituality in Christian marriages. In 1993, Worthington et al. examined the body of

literature on Christian marriage and Christian marriage counselling, and realized the great need for further research in all areas of Christian marriage. Booth and Johnson (1995) see the value of further research in that it could help therapists and churches to reach out to couples; they feel that their research has shown that “religious institutions are not yet providing family support and nurturance to adequately meet the challenges of contemporary life” (p. 671). Thus further research could help churches to better understand and support modern Christian marriages.

Additional research therefore, will not only help counsellors and psychologists to better understand and assist their spiritual clients with marriage challenges, but it may also provide churches and religious institutions with a better understanding of how to support and foster marital enhancement among their congregational members.

## CHAPTER 3: METHOD

## Phenomenological Methodology

Phenomenological research is a qualitative research method that was developed as a science of consciousness, by Edmund Husserl in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Klein & Westcott, 1994; Osborne, 1994). This type of research uses a methodology whereby the personal experiences of individuals are carefully described, recorded and examined. It is different from other qualitative research methods in that its intent is to relay the participants' experienced meaning of the phenomenon, rather than merely a physical description of the experience or behaviour (Polkinghorne, 1989). It provides a scientific method for entering the human mind and inner world (Osborne) The analysis of the personal experience often reveals structures and themes that are similar among individuals who share a common lived experience. The goal of phenomenological research is to produce clear, exact descriptions of what it is like for an individual to experience the situation being studied. To achieve this, it is important that the researcher approach the study with an open mind, free of pre-existing hypothesis about what one may discover (Polkinghorne). In essence, phenomenological research is a unique method that examines the detailed experience of individuals who are undergoing a common phenomenon.

Individuals who participate in qualitative research are not regarded as subjects or participants, but as co-researchers and contributors (other names such as research partner, or co-author are also used). Collaboration between the experimenter and the co-researcher is encouraged.

In contemporary phenomenological research, there exists a tension between its two branches. One branch, based on the historical traditions of Edmond Husserl (the father of phenomenological research), can be described as “pure and transcendental phenomenology” (Osborne, 1994, p. 173). The second branch is the hermeneutic or existential phenomenology of Martin Heidegger.

Husserlian phenomenology is based on the belief that the researcher can actually “see things as they are” intuitively (Osborne, 1994, p. 170). It uses processes of bracketing and reduction to reveal pure descriptions, which in itself will reveal ultimate meanings. Pure phenomenology is interested in the actual contents of experience.

Hermeneutic or existential phenomenology is based on the understanding that interpretation is unavoidable in phenomenological research. Heidegger created the hermeneutic method because he believed that pure description alone is “limited in its ability to reveal meaning” (Osborne, 1994, p. 173). Heidegger felt that it was important to interpret the meanings and thus take Husserlian/descriptive phenomenology a step further. There is greater interpretive license in existential phenomenology.

The lines between the two branches of phenomenological research are often blurred (Osborne, 1994). “There is no such thing as *the* phenomenological method. Phenomenological methodology is more of an orientation than a specific method” (Osborne, 1990, p. 83). Researchers often combine aspects of both phenomenologies. In fact, a compromise between the two types of phenomenological research appears to be the most common approach (Osborne, 1994). Contemporary researchers tend to use bracketing to reveal their biases and yet also take some interpretive license.

In this study, the researcher also chose to combine the understandings of Husserlian phenomenology and Heidegger's phenomenology. The researcher engaged in bracketing and also searched for revelation of meaning in the co-researchers descriptions. It was thought that this would be a way to acknowledge both types of phenomenological methodology and to combine positive aspects of each type of methodology

#### Rationale for Research Method

Phenomenological research was chosen because for this particular subject area it offers advantages over experimental and quantitative methodologies. Qualitative research in general, is well suited for tasks such as "defining new constructs" and "discovering new relationships among variables" (Sprenkle, 1994). As a technique that falls under the umbrella of qualitative research, phenomenological methodology is particularly useful when studying experiences that have not been studied in depth (Colaizzi, 1978; Heyink & Tymstra, 1993; Osborne, 1990; Sprenkle, 1994). Little is known about how Christians experience marriage and how their faith influences the marital relationship. It has not been studied from a phenomenological perspective. Thus, a qualitative study will allow co-researchers the opportunity to describe in detail what they have experienced, felt, and how they have acted in their Christian marriages. It will allow contributors to express ideas and thoughts that are not limited to the researchers' questions or personal hypotheses. This study will be exploratory in nature as there is currently little research on how Christian faith experientially influences the marriage experience.

As with other research methods, qualitative research can provide therapists and clinicians with additional insights and tools to use in a counselling session. Sprenkle (1994) states that, "Almost all areas of family therapy research could be enriched by using

qualitative approaches” (p. 227). This study aims to enhance understanding of Christian marriage dynamics through qualitative research, and to provide information that will be useful for counsellors engaging in couple and/or marital therapy.

#### The Phenomenon Under Investigation

A phenomenon can be understood as the central concept being examined by the researcher. The phenomenon is also the concept that the co-researcher has experienced. For this research project, the phenomenon examined will be the marital experience of Christian husbands and wives. The desired outcome will be to obtain meaning and description of this experience.

#### Procedure

Data from the interview was obtained and interpreted according to the methods and procedures described by researchers such as Colaizzi (1978), Osborne (1990) and Polkinghorne (1989). Phenomenological research tends to follow a five-step procedure as described below.

#### Framing the Question

The concept of how questions are framed is of great significance and importance to phenomenological research. Questions that are artfully and carefully framed or worded have a significant impact on the quality of research results. Well-framed questions can also be used to re-direct a co-researchers’ description of their personal experience, rather than a co-researchers’ socially acceptable description (Polkinghorne, 1989). In general, “what” questions are preferred over “why” questions. The question asked in this research study was, “According to your personal experience, how has your Christian faith influenced your marriage and your relationship with your spouse?”

### Bracketing

This step of phenomenological methodology involves the researcher examining his/her own personal ideas, attitudes, presuppositions, and biases about the phenomena being studied (see Appendix A). One purpose of this is to help the researcher become aware and conscious of underlying thoughts and beliefs that may influence the research (Colaizzi, 1978). The goal is to suspend these beliefs while conducting the research. The second purpose of bracketing is to allow readers to determine for themselves whether or not the researcher was successful in suspending his/her subjective views and whether or not the inherent biases coloured the research.

### Choosing and Recruiting Co-Researchers

Co-researchers were recruited according to the existential-phenomenological methodology described by Colaizzi (1978) and Polkinghorne (1989). There are two requirements according to Colaizzi and Polkinghorne: co-researchers must be currently experiencing, or have experienced, the phenomenon being studied; and he/she must be able to give accurate and full descriptions of her/his experience, including emotions and feelings surrounding the experience. It is also important that the individuals selected to partake in phenomenological research can provide a rich variety of experiences. It is of lesser value to have co-researchers who all have had very similar experiences of the phenomenon; it is desirable that co-researchers can add new descriptions and variables of their experiences. For this study, this would include participants who have been married for varying lengths of time and who have had a variety of marital experiences.

This study had several criteria for inclusion of participants. First of all, each co-researcher had to identify him/herself as being a “practicing Christian.” For the purpose

of this research a “practicing Christian” was defined as one who believed in the God of the Bible, and regularly participated in prayer, Bible reading and church attendance.

Participants also had to be currently married to a Christian spouse, and had to have been married for a minimum of five years. The purpose of the co-researchers being married for five years or longer was to ensure that the marriage had some longevity to it, that the experiences and details of co-researchers were rich and varied, and to avoid any possible “honeymoon” effects. It was necessary that the spouse was also a Christian because the purpose of the study was to focus on religiously homogamous marriages.

A goal of 10 co-researchers was seen as desirable. However, the ultimate decision to stop collecting data was made once it was perceived that all aspects of the phenomenon had been brought forth and that further data would merely be redundant (Osborne, 1994). Once saturation had been achieved (i.e., no new data was being gleaned from co-researchers), the recruitment and interview process ended (Wertz, 1984, as cited in Osborne, 1990). The sex of the co-researchers was an equal numbers of males and females, so as to achieve a balance between the sexes. Thus, in total, five men and five women were used in this study.

Co-researchers were recruited from one local church via an advertisement in the church Sunday bulletins (see Appendix B, Advertisement in Church Bulletin). Two separate e-mail requests for participants were sent—one email to students of the Counselling Psychology program at Trinity Western, and one email to acquaintances of the researcher (see Appendix C, Email Advertisements). Word of mouth was also used, and the request for participants was announced at a Bible study. Those who expressed an interest in participating were given an information sheet on the study (see Appendix D,

Initial Information Letter to Interested Co-Researchers). Participants were accepted on a “first come, first served” basis.

Participation was completely voluntary and co-researchers were informed that they could drop out of the study at their will with no repercussions. Individuals who participated in both the initial and the follow-up interviews were entered in a draw for a \$75 gift certificate to a local restaurant. There was no perceived risk in participating in this study.

### Data Collection

Phenomenological research generally employs interviews as the method of data collection. The goal of the interview is to obtain a personal description of the co-researchers’ experience of the phenomenon. Information is best obtained from open-ended, unstructured interviews. It is important to obtain “naïve descriptions of the actuality of experiences as it is lived rather than to collect embellished and narrative accounts that are based upon what the participant believes is expected by the researcher” (Osborne, 1994, p. 171). In this study, co-researchers were asked to describe their experience of being a practicing Christian who is married.

At the first interview, co-researchers were given information about the research project and were then asked to sign an Informed Consent Form (see Appendix E). While this was occurring, it was important to establish a positive rapport with the co-researcher (Osborne, 1990).

The audio taped interview phase then began. It was intended to be an informal, open-ended, in-person interview, so that co-researchers felt free and comfortable in sharing their lived experiences. A statement by the researcher was read at the beginning

of each interview (see Appendix F, Interview and Question Format). In it, co-researchers were encouraged to be open and honest in talking about their experiences. Co-researchers were asked to answer in as much detail as possible, their understanding of, “According to your personal experience, how has your Christian faith influenced your marriage and your relationship with your spouse?”

Additional probing questions were asked as needed, such as: “What other aspects of your marriage has your faith influenced? How? How do you think your marriage experience is different from what it would be like if you and your spouse were not Christians?”

The goal was to obtain a spontaneous and pure description of the experience of being a spouse who is a practicing Christian. As such, general questions were asked, rather than detailed questions, so as to not influence or bias the co-researchers responses. Questions such as, “What is this experience like for you?” were asked rather than “why” questions. Basic interviewing skills such as empathy and reflection were used to draw out detailed descriptions of the experience.

It was crucial that the researcher not disclose her theoretical orientation or personal biases during the interview so as to prevent influencing the co-researchers. Interviews lasted between 45 and 120 minutes, depending on each individual’s ability to self-reflect and explore her/his experience. Co-researchers expressed that it was a positive experience for them; it allowed them to reflect and organize their thoughts on the phenomenon and they enjoyed sharing this with an outside individual. They found it to be an encouraging and uplifting experience.

### Ethical Considerations

All efforts were made to ensure that the research was conducted in an ethical manner. Procedures were approved by the Ethics Committee of Trinity Western University and were supervised by Dr. Chuck MacKnee. Participants were told that they could contact MacKnee or Mrs. Candy O'Connor (of Trinity Western University) if they had any ethical questions or concerns about the project. Individuals who expressed interest in participating in the study were given full and honest descriptions of what was expected of co-researchers. Consent forms (see Appendix E) were provided for all participants and the interviews did not proceed until co-researchers gave their informed consent. They were informed that confidentiality was guaranteed and that their participation was optional; they were also told that they could choose to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Any questions participants had were answered honestly.

It was a high priority to protect the confidentiality of co-researcher. To ensure this, each individual was assigned a pseudonym name. The pseudonyms were used in the protocols and in all write-ups of the findings. Only the researcher knew the true identity of each participant, and this information was kept confidential. Co-researchers understood that the researcher and thesis supervisor would be the only people with access to the audio recording of the interview. Any other identifying information (such as names of family members or churches) was omitted from the transcripts.

During the writing of the thesis audiotapes and transcripts were kept in a locked filing cabinet. Once thesis requirements are met, all tapes will be erased and transcripts will be saved on a password-protected disc to be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the offices of

the Counselling Psychology department of Trinity Western University. Should these transcripts be used again, co-researchers will be contacted via the contact information they gave to the researcher.

#### Data analysis

Once all the interviews were conducted, data was analyzed through a combination of steps provided by Colaizzi (1978), and Polkinghorne (1989). The steps used are as follows:

1. Audio taped interviews were transcribed verbatim into protocols.
2. All protocols were read through in order to obtain a general feel of the data obtained.
3. The protocols were re-read, and relevant and important statements were identified. These statements were those directly describing the phenomenon being studied.
4. Units or blocks within each protocol that appeared to convey a self-contained meaning were found. These meaning units (statements or paragraphs that contained a complete idea and were directly relevant to the idea of Christian marriages) were noted and identified. This required interpretation and discovering the meaning of co-researchers comments. The end result of this step was a comprehensive listing of meaning blocks that were found within each transcript.
5. Themes that described the basic point made in each meaning unit were created and written down. This step involved transforming a meaning unit (in everyday language) into a psychological statement that described the concept of Christian faith influencing marriage. These themes needed to be specific, have

psychologically relevant meaning, and be distinct from other themes. Many themes were listed in this step.

6. Similar themes were then grouped together and synthesized into broader, yet more descriptive, themes that were common to all protocols. These themes needed to be clearly distinct from each other, and yet not too exclusive. Thirteen common themes were found, each having several sub-themes. These themes were written into an exhaustive description (a detailed and in depth description) of the participants' experiences. The exhaustive description was then reduced into a common story that described in general the experience of how faith influenced the marriage relationship of the ten co-researchers.
7. The validity of the extracted themes was tested by checking with co-researchers to see if they agreed or disagreed with the themes and common story.
8. Reliability of the themes was tested by having an outside judge (a Trinity Western graduate student) categorize 30 random meaning units into what he saw as the appropriate corresponding theme.

### Reliability

Traditional quantitative research understands reliability to be the degree to which the findings are consistent and replicable. However, in qualitative research, all co-researchers personal experiences are considered to be true to the individual and thus reliable. Reliability can be better understood as the “persistence of meaning through the factual variations” (Wertz, 1986, p.186). Interviews can never be replicated and tested for reliability in the same manner that quantitative research can be.

For the purpose of phenomenological methodology, reliability can be understood as the proper interpretation of transcripts and resulting themes. Thus, outsiders should be able to read and sort meaning units into similar themes. Reliability also refers to the dependability of the data. It does not refer to the “truthfulness” of the co-researchers’ experience, because all humans create their own subjective reality. To ensure internal reliability (the degree of consensus between researchers working together), the thesis supervisor, Dr. Chuck MacKnee, read the transcripts to confirm consensus between him and the researcher on the theme descriptions and the classification of meaning units into the various themes.

External reliability was accounted for by an outside researcher (a graduate Trinity Western student). This researcher reviewed approximately 10% of the meaning units (30) and matched them with their appropriate themes. Comparison was made between his categorization of meaning units and the categorization of the researcher. No large areas of differences existed. He correctly identified 28 of the 30 themes (93%) and this was seen as being a response that confirmed reliability.

### Validity

In quantitative research, validity refers to the degree with which the research investigates what it is intended to research, and the degree of accuracy of the results. In phenomenological research, validity is understood as “whether or not the findings can be trusted” and how much confidence a reader may have in the findings (Polkinghorne, 1989). The reader must be able to follow the thought processes and logical conclusions that the researcher makes when analyzing the data, and be convinced that the findings are accurate. The report therefore, must be clearly written, and be a persuasive argument.

To ensure that there was high validity, the researcher engaged in bracketing—a procedure whereby she undergoes a process of self-reflection on the subject being researched. She acknowledged her assumptions and possible biases so that she could consciously prevent them from penetrating into the research. Readers can refer to Appendix A to read the bracketing of the researcher and to determine for themselves if results were influenced by her biases and life experiences. Readers will also learn how the researchers personal experiences influenced the research.

The researcher also checked validity during a second interview. Co-researchers were mailed a package that included: an explanatory letter (see Appendix G, Validity Check Letter to Co-researchers), a list of all the extracted themes, and the Common Story. A follow-up telephone interview took place. During this phone call participants were all asked the following two questions: “How do my descriptive results (the “Common Story”) compare with your experience?” and “Have any aspects of your experience been omitted?” Clarification questions were also asked in regards to theme 2 (Role in Marriage: Traditional versus Egalitarian). Co-researchers had the opportunity to clarify prior comments and comment on how the description and themes related to their personal experiences. These interviews lasted anywhere from five to 30 minutes. The answers and observations of participants were written down and any changes were noted and incorporated into the results.

Validity was also checked by seeing if the findings were in accordance with prior research and/or theories (Osborne, 1994). Although little research exists on this specific topic, findings were in concurrence with existing literature.

### “Generalizability”

Generalizability is understood in phenomenological research somewhat differently than in other research methodologies. In phenomenological studies, the goal is not the ability to apply the results of the study to other populations. Osborne (1990) understands “generalizability” in phenomenological research as being one of four validity checks. He states that validity of the results “depends upon the extent to which that structure resonates with the experiences of other people, not in the study” (p. 88) who have experienced the phenomenon that is being investigated.

In regards to “generalizability” of this study, only ten participants were interviewed. However, the researcher was of the opinion that saturation had been achieved (Osborne, 1994) and that no new data would be forthcoming if additional co-researchers were interviewed. As well, the co-researchers who came forth represented diverse personal qualities. Their ages (from 34 to 79), the number of years married (8 to 50 years), and educational levels from some high school completed to university graduates) were diverse. As well, both genders were equally represented.

Generalizability is based on “empathic understanding rather than statistical explanatory procedures” (Osborne, 1990, p.80). As well, in social sciences, the focus is shifting from a desire for universal generalizability, to emphasizing the contextuality of knowledge (Kvale, 1994). The ultimate question of generalizability of this study will be resolved by asking others who have experienced this particular phenomenon, whether or not the descriptive interpretations resonate with their personal experiences

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

## The Participants

Co-researchers had a large range of personal and career backgrounds. Five females and five males participants ranged in age from 34 to 79 years ( $M= 48$  years). They were all currently married to Christian spouses and had been married for between eight and 50 years ( $M= 24$  years). Six of the co-researchers were married to another co-researcher (a total of three married couples in the study); seven different marriages were represented in the interviews. All co-researchers had only been married once; none had co-habited with anyone before they married. All participants had children—ranging from five months old to grown adults with children of their own. Therefore, three co-researchers also had grandchildren. All participants were Caucasian.

The majority of participants were Christians when they married; however one participant did not come to Christian faith until later in life. As well, many reported that their faith life grew immensely from the time that they were married. Three said that they although they had believed in Christ, they did not consider themselves to be practicing their faith at the time that they were married.

In terms of career and work, two male co-researchers were retired (former businessman and former engineer), three women were full-time homemakers, and one woman was on maternity leave. Occupations of the employed co-researchers included: nurse, electrician, self-employed multi-media design worker, ESL tutor, and businessman.

Educational backgrounds were also varied. Two participants had completed some high school, six were high school graduates with college diplomas or credits, and two had graduated from university with Bachelor degrees.

All co-researchers lived in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia.

#### Themes and Sub-themes

Through data analysis, thirteen themes and forty eight sub-themes emerged. These themes, representing how Christian faith influenced the marriage and spousal relationship of these 10 co-researchers, are displayed in Table 1. Although the themes are numbered from one to thirteen, they do not represent a hierarchy or any sort of specific order.

It is worthwhile to note that while performing validity checks with co-researchers over the phone, one participant mentioned the idea of marriage goals and ideals versus reality. While all the themes that had emerged were consistent with his personal experience and understanding, he wanted to clarify that because of his sinful nature these understandings of how Christian faith influenced his marriage were not always true. For him, the themes represented how he desired to act and think as a husband; however, he often sinned and fell short, disappointing both himself, his spouse, and God. He proposed that the other participants, acknowledging their Christian understanding of being sinners, would also feel the same way.

Table 1

Themes and Sub-Themes of the Influence of Christian Faith in the Marriage Relationship

13 THEMES	48 SUB-THEMES
<p><b>1. Spiritual Leading in Choosing a Spouse</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practicing Christians Desired a Christian Spouse</li> <li>• Practicing Christians Prayed About Decision to Marry</li> <li>• God Purposefully Put Them Together as Husband and Wife</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. A Spiritual Understanding of the Origin and Design of Marriage</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• God is the Creator of Marriage: Satan Wants to Destroy the Marriage</li> <li>• Marriage is a Lifetime Commitment Made to Both Spouse and to God</li> <li>• Marriage Succeeds When God is a Higher Priority than the Marriage</li> <li>• Roles in Marriage: Traditional or Egalitarian</li> </ul>
<p><b>3. A Spiritual Experience of God Being an Active Participant in the Marriage</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• God is a Third Presence in the Marriage</li> <li>• God Holds the Marriage Together</li> <li>• God Provides for Their Emotional Needs</li> </ul>
<p><b>4. A Spiritual Understanding and Experience of Love</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• God is the Source of Their Love</li> <li>• Scripture Provides Guidance on How to Love</li> <li>• God Gives Specific and Effective Guidance on How to Love</li> <li>• Love Involve Acceptance and Valuing of Spouse</li> <li>• Love Involves Selflessness and Sacrifice</li> <li>• Love Involves Communication</li> <li>• Love Means They Are a Team</li> <li>• Love is Not Conditional</li> <li>• Spiritual Loving is a Joyful Experience</li> <li>• Receiving This Spiritual Love from Spouse Helps Them to Better Understand God’s Love for Them</li> </ul>
<p><b>5. A Spiritual Understanding and Experience of Sexuality</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sex is a Gift From God That Belongs Only in a Marriage Relationship</li> <li>• God Bestows Blessings Through Sex</li> </ul>

<b>6. Spiritual Resources and Support That Enhance Marital Satisfaction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scripture</li> <li>• Christian Books and Authors</li> <li>• Christian Marriage Conferences</li> <li>• Christian Counsellors</li> <li>• Other Christians</li> <li>• Personal Prayer</li> </ul>
<b>7. Shared Spiritual Foundations Regarding Values and Life Philosophy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared Meaning in Life/Shared Worldview</li> <li>• Hope and Optimism</li> <li>• Peace About Death and Spouse Dying</li> <li>• Outreach: Witnessing and Serving</li> </ul>
<b>8. Shared Spiritual Applications in Finances and Parenting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finances</li> <li>• Parenting</li> </ul>
<b>9. Shared Faith Rituals and Activities Promote Deeper Intimacy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared Prayer</li> <li>• Devotions and Bible Studies</li> <li>• Attending Church</li> <li>• Being Involved in Ministry Together</li> <li>• Encouraging Each Other's Faith and Spiritual Growth</li> </ul>
<b>10. Spiritual Components of Conflict Resolution</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prevention of Conflict</li> <li>• Spiritual Motivation and Hope in Resolving Conflict</li> <li>• Prayer: Individually and as a Couple</li> <li>• God's Intervention and Guidance</li> <li>• Reconciliation: Confession and Forgiveness</li> </ul>
<b>11. Spiritual and Faith Challenges to the Marital Relationship</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Differences in Faith Maturity</li> <li>• Disagreement as to How God is Leading</li> </ul>
<b>12. Personal Faith Positively Affects the Marriage Relationship</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marriage and Faith are Intertwined</li> <li>• Faith Changes Individuals in Positive Ways</li> </ul>
<b>13. Spiritual Gratitude for Spouse</b>	

### Exhaustive Description

Themes are listed and described from 1 to 13, however this does not reflect a hierarchy of significance. Each of the 13 themes and 48 sub-themes represent the lived experience of how Christian faith has influenced the marriages and relationships of spouses. These themes are discussed below and quotations from co-researchers are used

to highlight and clarify meanings that emerged. Note that all names that are used in the exhaustive description are pseudonyms.

### Theme 1: Spiritual Leading in Choosing a Spouse

The experience of how co-researchers chose their spouses differed, depending on whether or not they were practicing Christians at the time when they were dating and engaged. Those who were active believers during this time in their lives described including God in the process of deciding to get married. However, all participants, regardless of their faith when dating, agreed now that God had specifically brought them together as husband and wife (even if they had been unaware of it at the time).

#### Practicing Christians Desired a Christian Spouse

Those who were “practicing Christians” at the time that they were dating (six of the participants) shared that they had had a spiritual understanding and belief that they should marry a Christian. As one wife shared, “At the outset it was crucial to our decision to be married that we were Christian. I mean we would not have each married a non-Christian.”

Using biblical texts, these individuals described how important it was to them that they married a fellow believer. One contributor stated:

God calls us to be equally yoked. It doesn't mean that we have to agree on everything in life, but if we're going to be equally yoked in our marriage, our faith in Christ has to be number one. God says that a Christian should marry a Christian.

Their faith led them to desire a spouse with whom they were spiritually compatible.

### Practicing Christians Prayed About Decision to Marry

Once they had met their future spouses, those who were practicing Christians took the decision to marry quite seriously. Before becoming engaged, they prayed and asked for God's guidance in their decision. One woman recalled:

And I remember I prayed a lot. And I was sitting there, 'Do You really want me to marry him?' It was just good for me to have that time with God and to be seeking Him in my decision process.

Through this time of prayer co-researchers reached an understanding that God was allowing and/or blessing their future marriage, and then felt comfortable to proceed with marriage arrangements. Another participant remembered, "We had prayed about it and that meant that we felt we were the right people to be married."

### God Purposefully Put Them Together as Husband and Wife

All participants (even those who had a "nominal faith" while dating) believed that God specifically brought themselves and their spouses together. They expressed a belief that God had an ultimate purpose and plan for bringing them together. One woman said:

And so there's gotta be a reason in God's scheme that we are supposed to be together. To accomplish something. We don't know what it is—it might just be through our children, who knows. It might be in something that he encourages me to do that I would've never done if it weren't for him, and vice versa.

Although none of the contributors claimed to know God's ultimate reasoning or will in having them marry their partners, they nonetheless believed and took comfort in the idea

that God had an overarching purpose to their marriage and life together. This understanding helped sustain them when going through difficult times in their marriages.

We're together because God wants us to be together. And at times when you feel like giving up and you feel like quitting, you've got to realize that it's not just me. This is God's plan. You know, I'm a participant in it, but for the most part, it's bigger than me and my wants.

One man, who was not a Christian when he married his wife, described his strong conviction that God brings all couples together. After he and his wife became dedicated Christians, he looked back and understood that God had worked in His marriage, even before he was a believer:

I'm totally convinced that the Lord is the real matchmaker ... He picks people that He wants to have together. Not as a tolerable match, but as a perfect match out of all the people.... He had chosen her for me even before I really walked with the Lord. Because when I look back right now, it almost looks like an accident... Yet even at the time, He knew.

#### Theme 2: A Spiritual Understanding of the Origin and Design of Marriage

Co-participants widely talked about the biblical origin and design for marriage.

Understanding God's purpose and desire for marriage greatly impacted their personal beliefs and attitudes regarding their own marriages. They took biblical passages regarding marriage very seriously and incorporated them into their relationships with their spouses.

Their spiritual beliefs regarding marriage fell into four different areas.

#### God is the Creator of Marriage; Satan Wants to Damage the Relationship

Co-researchers shared a basic and foundational understanding that God was the creator of marriage. They believed that he designed it with a purpose and plan in mind—He desired one man and one woman to leave their families of origin and join together to create their own unique family. One woman described this as, “We come back to that Genesis passage about leaving and cleaving. God took us from our families and put us together as a new unit.” Participants also included the aspect of sexuality as part of God’s basic design for marriage. As this wife stated, “I mean it is biblical that you are supposed to leave your parents and you’re supposed to cleave unto your husband and He made us sexual beings and so that’s a big factor for why we get married.”

Part of the participants’ understanding of God as the creator and proponent of healthy marriage included the belief that Satan, as the antithesis to God, was an opponent of strong and healthy marriages. Participants described Satan as a being who worked to attack and destroy their marriages using a myriad of methods. This husband described Satan's goal as this:

Well he (Satan) wants to destroy anything that God has built in our marriage... To tear down and to have us focus on each other’s weaknesses and sins. To take the strength, the blessings for granted and just not even pay attention to them at all.

Very much bringing that selfish thinking back into it. Keeping our eyes on our self and our problems rather than on God.

Participants viewed Satan as an enemy who “attacks” couples in all aspects of their marriage, including their sexuality. One husband expressed, “I think he attacks couples in their sex life too. Just like he does in their finances, just like he does in any area of a relationship.” They saw him as one who wanted to destroy healthy marriages and wanted

couples to divorce. They shared that Satan's work was often subtle but that it was continuous and so they needed to be aware of his tactics and guard their marriages against his influence. After all, as one participant stated: "If Satan can find one little chink in the amour to try and take you apart, he's just gonna put the sledgehammer in there and he's gonna pound it."

#### Marriage is a Lifetime Commitment Made to Both Spouse and to God

A second spiritual understanding of marriage was that the marital vows were a lifetime commitment. Spouses said that they made this vow to not only their partners, but also to God. This meant that they saw their vows as being an even bigger commitment that they needed to uphold. One man shared, "When we both said our vows we didn't say it for the purpose of meeting the signature requirements on the marriage certificate. It was a vow before God." Because this vow was made to God, there was a much higher sense of responsibility and accountability for keeping the marriage together. One co-researcher described it like this: "A commitment meaning when you say its 'till death do us part.' That means no matter what the circumstances...God is real and we made that commitment in front of him".

The marital vows also sustained them during trying periods in marriage and reminded them that they were to stay faithful to their spouse. One wife shared, "That was so strong for me—knowing that I'm supposed to be with Bill and that I've done this promise before God. There was no way I was going to back out on it."

Participants also shared their belief that God was in control of their marriages. A woman explained that, "God holds that commitment secure amidst the storm of life and whatever comes and goes and changes. We know he's holding it securely." Because God

alone determines when a marriage ends (due to death of a spouse) divorce is not an option. This husband expressed, “You’re my wife good times or bad until we die. Because God is in control of our death, that’s when He decides the marriage is over. Not when we decide the marriage is over.”

#### Marriage Succeeds When God is a Higher Priority Than the Marriage

There was a common understanding that in order for a Christian marriage to be healthy and strong, God needed to be the priority above all things in their lives, including their spouses. One husband stated simply, “God first, our spouses second.” Another husband echoed the importance of God remaining the highest priority: “In order to preserve our marriage we needed to give it up as our first love, and invite Jesus in to be our first love.”

Co-researchers shared that although having God as a priority above their spouse seemed counter-intuitive to maintaining a strong relationship, that this actually helped to strengthen and preserve their marriages. One husband noticed a positive difference in his marriage when he allowed God to be the priority over his wife: “Isabella was taken from position one to position two. And normally you would say, ‘Hey, that’s a demotion.’ But it was the other way around. Because by making Jesus my first love, I became a better lover!”

#### Roles in Marriage: Traditional or Egalitarian

Five of the ten co-researchers (three women, two men) spoke about their biblical understanding that the husband was to have the ultimate decision-making role in their marriages. These five strongly believed that it was a God-given role for the husband to lead his family in situations where the husband and wife, after much discussion, cannot

reach a mutual decision. One wife shared how this worked in her marriage and why she believed she should defer to her husband's decisions at times:

It's not that you don't have the ability to assert your opinion, it's that you choose at the end of the day when all the conversations have been had and all the discussions have been had, that you have agreed to disagree. That you choose to defer to their authority in the household because of Christ. Not because you agree with them or you think their decision is better. But it's because Christ has ordained the family in this way and if I'm going to follow Christ then I defer when he says it's time to.

Co-researchers described this role division as being based on the biblical analogy of Christ loving and taking care of the church. It was not a role of dominance but rather, like Christ's example, was a role of love, sacrifice, and responsibility. This is one woman's understanding of why this role division works:

In Scripture it makes reference to Christ being the head of the church...in the same way, the family is a microcosm of that example where someone has to be the last word. The team works if there's a captain. Otherwise it's a committee! There's a sense that there would be no sense of direction without someone who will have the final say.

The role of the husband in times where the two were not in agreement was to prayerfully seek God's will for the family and to take into account his wife's thoughts on the subject. The women trusted that their husbands' decision-making would be unselfishly based on what was best for the entire family, "Because it's also scriptural that he wants the best not just for himself but for his family."

The wives did not play a passive role in these situations. Rather, the female participants described that their role was to pray for their husbands, to trust God that he would lead their husbands wisely, and to accept the decision that they ultimately made. The wives emphasized that accepting the decision of their husbands was not about trusting in their husbands' ability or wisdom but rather trusting that God was leading their husbands and that God was working in them. One wife summed it up this way:

But if I trust that God is holding our marriage together, I can trust God that he will lead this man if I pray for him and agree to live in covenant with him according to God's plan. I can trust that God will lead him...I either trust God that He's capable of leading this man as the head of the household, or I don't...I'm going to trust you Lord, no matter how it turns, that you were leading him. Because I pray for him all the time. And I've learned that you work through him just fine.

The other five participants reported that their marriages were more egalitarian, with no one person having the final say. As one wife shared, "If don't agree on a decision we don't do anything...No one person has the final say." These five participants did not believe in the above principle of submission, but rather, believed that both spouses should be mutually submissive to one another. They said that the method of decision-making when there were stalemates varied according to the circumstances.

One participant said that both he and his wife were willing to submit and yield to the other when they could not agree on a decision. For them, the spouse who was able to be more objective and less emotional in the situation usually made the decision. For example, when his son was ill in the hospital he tended to make the decisions because he was able to be more rational and less emotional in that circumstance than his wife. When

a decision was more important to one than the other (i.e., decisions about decorating or house plans), they yielded to the desires of whomever it was more important to.

Another participant said that decisions were never made unless both she and her husband were in agreement regarding the issue at hand. “We don’t sort of act like lone rangers—‘well I want to do this, I’ll do my thing and you do your thing’... We don’t do it unless we both agree.”

Theme 3: A Spiritual Experience of God Being an Active Participant  
in the Marriage

There was an understanding among the co-researchers that God was a strong presence in their marriage. Not only was he described as a “third person” in the marriage, but he was also seen as the Person who ultimately held their marriage together. Despite their vows, commitment and desire to stay married, they recognized God as being the glue that enabled them to remain together. God was also described as one who supplied them with strength and resilience during difficult times. Many participants discussed turning to God, trusting in Him, and leaning on Him.

God is a Third Presence in the Marriage

God was seen as a third person in the marriage. The marriage was not merely a relationship between the husband and wife, but was a relationship between husband, wife and God. He was seen as an active being in the marriage.

Some described God’s presence as more of a vague or hidden presence: “We know that there’s another person there in our relationship. It’s not just us.” Others saw God as an actual, concrete presence:

God is a part of our marriage. Kind of like your wedding band has no beginning or end. God is there and He has no beginning or end— it's eternal that he will always love us as we are always to love each other.

Another described God as being the third person in the triangle of their marriage: "Our marriage verse is, 'A cord of three strands are not easily broken.' Meaning that God and Keith and I—rather than just the two of us working. But three."

#### God Holds the Marriage Together

As an active third party in the marriage, one of God's roles was to keep the marriage together. Co-researchers repeatedly mentioned this theme. As one individual expressed, "You have all of those normal things like any other marriage but there's the sense that someone else is holding it together." They relied and trusted God to intervene and help their marriages endure. "We believe that...God will help us to stay married. Because that's what He wants for us." God enabled them to keep their marriage vows to each other and supplied them with all that they need for their marriage to succeed. One wife stated, "We recognize that this is meant to last and that God will make it last. Our only job is to stay. The rest, God will give us the love and everything that goes with it that's necessary."

When troubles came, they depended on Him and trusted that He would hold them together. One wife voiced that as a newlywed when the reality of marriage and its challenges had become evident to her, God promised that He would protect and uphold her marriage:

God so quickly comes under you and says, ‘My love is how you’re going to maintain this. The dream and the love I gave you that floated you into this (marriage), I’ll be the meat and potatoes that will hold you there.’

One woman described the act of God holding their marriage together for 50 years as a miracle. She shared:

The fact that a couple can stay married and be with each other every day, through feeling sick, through traumas of accidents or whatever it might be, the fact that God can hold that together is just nothing short of a miracle.

A husband also credited God with helping him and his wife to remain married for over 30 years: “And there were years where, according to my wife, I was very hard to live with. ...Unless the Lord had intervened, she probably would have divorced me.”

One wife described God’s interventions as being supernatural: “When I think about it now, I think it’s an absolute miracle that one, we met. Two, we got married. And three that we’re still married! It truly is a miracle of God!”

### God Provides for Their Emotional Needs

Co-researchers said that they trusted and relied on God for strength and endurance in difficult circumstances. Some shared about this through general descriptions of how God had been there for them. One husband revealed:

We can say for all of those last twenty years that I don’t need to rely on my own strength, which I found was quite limited. But the joy of the Lord is my strength.

And He’ll look after all of the things that we’re not able to handle ourselves.

Another husband expressed it like this:

When her resources are exhausted, or my resources are exhausted, we know God can always do more, that we can't see being possible. And that's having the faith of knowing that God will always step up to the plate and do it when we ask.

Another man described how he turned to God in this manner: "All I need to do is to turn to the Lord for help and know that He can help me. He can help her. And He will!"

Some co-researchers shared very specific examples of how God had helped them emotionally. One husband described a particularly difficult time in the early years of his marriage:

Shortly after we were married when we had our first two children...Marilyn had a nervous breakdown and the family was broken up...And I can remember getting down on my face on the floor and pleading with God and staying there for quite a long time. And all of a sudden I felt a real peace about the situation. Like it's going to be okay.

Another woman who was dealing with health issues said that she trusted God would uphold her and her family: "But all along we know that God is carrying us. He will provide bit-by-bit whatever is needed. He gives us what we need and it keeps the three of us (husband, wife, God) together."

#### Theme 4: A Spiritual Understanding and Experience of Love

Co-researchers discussed love in strongly spiritual terms. They reported that God had influenced their understanding of love and had affected how they showed love to their spouses.

#### God is the Source of Their Love

It was repeatedly mentioned that God was the source of their love. God was the one who showed them how to love and helped them to love their partners. One husband experienced this as God's love becoming a part of him: "I think God helps you to love the other person. Because God is love and that rubs off on you."

A wife described that her love for her husband came from God. Her heavenly father was the source of her love: "I believe that God gives us love and I think only through him we have perfect love with each other."

A husband described the love he felt as an almost mysterious or magical force from God: "We don't brew this up ourselves how we feel towards another. It is something that comes, comes upon us."

Another participant shared that over time as she learned to love as God would have her love, His love flowed through her with greater ease: "The longer you love that way, the easier it becomes...the more you allow God to love through you that way, the more automatic it becomes."

#### Scripture Provides Guidance on How to Love

One husband reported that he read the Bible in order to learn how to love his wife. His best example of how to love was to follow the example of Jesus:

It says in the Word that God is love. So I have to love her in a godly way, because God is love. Anything else that I describe isn't sufficient because that's not what it means. If I try to be good and nice and kind to her, I find out that my love is insufficient. It doesn't measure up. So I have to basically say, 'How would Jesus treat her?'

Jesus was his inspiration in loving his wife. When he loved her in this manner, he discovered that his love was stronger. “What I do when I am convicted to love my wife is to say ‘I want to treat her like Jesus would.’ The more I do that, the more I can love her.” Another husband shared that he had learned from a passage in the New Testament how he was to treat his wife:

For husbands in Ephesians, ‘Husbands love your wives.’ I mean that’s my main goal. ‘Husbands love your wives.’ It’s not very complicated. How do I love her? Well there’s all kinds of ways I can show I love her by helping her and encouraging her and listening to her

One woman shared, “You are called, in the Bible, to do that. To love your husband in all conditions and to be faithful to him and support him and I believe that that’s my job as his wife.”

#### God Gives Specific and Effective Guidance on How to Love

Participants shared that at times God gave them specific and unique ideas on how they were to show love to their partners. One husband told of how his own ways of loving his wife had been ineffective:

For a long period...I came as a husband to my wife set out to try and appease Isabella. To cater to ‘whatever she may want right now, I’ll do it for her to satisfy her.’ To get her off my back. To even please her at the time. And I tried that for many, many years. I wasn’t very good at it. Or somehow it didn’t have the desired effect.

He described that when he had asked God for help in how he should love his wife, God had asked him to do things that he had never expected:

I'd rather turn to the Lord and say, 'What would you do, Lord?' And it's sometimes a totally different thing. Instead of sending her flowers, it may be something really simple like saying, 'I'm sorry for waking you up last night with my snoring.' Or the Lord would bring something to mind where I actually need to confess to my wife that I wasn't as good as I made out to be in whatever.

He believed that loving his wife according to God's leading had a much stronger effect on his wife than he had ever imagined possible. He discovered that loving as God directed him was much more powerful and transforming for his marriage:

I still buy her flowers. And I get the colour right now, too. But it's not the same. It doesn't have the same 'uumph.' 'Jesus, you love her. And let me know how you would do it,' and it's of a different consequence. It can never match with my picking out a diamond ring or whatever I may want to do for her out of my own good administration of love. I'm still being surprised at times of the Lord, what He shows me how to love her.

Another participant shared this same sentiment. This wife conveyed that when she loved according to how God had led her, it turned out to be a much more effective way of loving than she could have done on her own:

God will have you love in a way that's a real bull's eye. You may never see how well God has loved that person through you. It's not always something that you can see. But I know that the way God has me love Shawn is effective.

When co-researchers followed God's leading—even when it seemed odd—the results were much more dramatic than when they had displayed their love in more common ways. As

one man put it: “The kind of love that I have heard God wanting me to administer to Isabella and show her, has great effects that are not expected.”

### Love Involves Acceptance and Valuing of Spouse

The data obtained from the co-researchers also indicated that loving their spouses involved an unconditional acceptance of who their spouse is. In other words, participants realized that love meant accepting their partners as they were, without wanting or expecting them to change. One wife revealed:

When I started to realize that God made Bill special just the way he is, and it was wrong for me to want to change him and to try and force that issue on him, it was kind of like a letting go spell. You know, where you're just like, 'Okay, well this is the way he is.'

Another wife said that seeing her husband as a gift from God helped her to accept him unconditionally: “Seeing them as a gift it means accepting them good and bad. For better or worse—we really need to mean that.”

Women also mentioned that it was important to accept the gender differences that existed between them and their husbands:

But to accept that God wanted them aggressive and the need to be the hunter/gatherer, however that might look in their life. Shawn happens to like hunting—I'm completely disgusted by it! But I recognize that God made him that way and that that's a protecting, providing quality that God put in him that is supposed to be there.

Co-researchers saw the value and wisdom in God creating man and woman to be unique from each other. One wife expressed, “He made us differently so we would work as a team. We would complete each other.”

Others described that unconditional acceptance included loving their spouses even though their physical appearance had changed during the years: “Yeah you notice a grey hair and you notice the pounds here and there, and the arthritis is taking it’s toll, and so? You know the essence of the person that God gave you to love is there.”

### Love Involves Selflessness and Sacrifice

Co-researchers frequently mentioned that in their marriages they made sacrifices for their spouses. As one husband simply put it, “I will try and think of her first as opposed to myself first.” Another husband shared, “There’s only one example that we can look to for love and that’s Jesus. He gave himself and that means giving up my desires.” Spouses saw personal sacrifice and giving up of personal desires as a necessary component of loving their partners. One man explained it as: “It’s a willingness to say, I don’t have to be right all the time. I don’t have to get my way all the time. I guess it’s meant to be the opposite of selfish.”

They believed that marriage involved compromise, which meant that they could not always get what they desired. They saw the ability to be selfless when needed as a gift from God:

To say ‘Your opinion and your feelings on this matter, matter to me as much as mine do.’ To be able to really do that from the heart and that would be another one of those miracles that God gives.

Selflessness, as a gift from God, was also described this way:

Without Christ at the centre to fuel our love for each other and our willingness to sacrifice for each other, we become two people who think nicely of each other and love each other and enjoy being together but at the core we're essentially selfish.

One woman succinctly put it:

In marriage, sacrifice is a huge part of it. If anyone's ever played on a sports team they know that they end up having to sacrifice some things for the good of the team. And that's no different in a marriage where we have to sacrifice in order for the marriage to be as healthy as possible.

### Love Involves Communication

Several individuals also mentioned the importance of communicating regularly and intimately with their husbands/wives. One husband had learned the importance of sharing with his wife at a Bible study: "A Bible study...really kind of opened up things. The biggest thing I learned there is communication with your spouse. To let her know how you feel and how and to talk openly about anything. Just the two of you."

Another husband believed communication to be part of a healthy marriage and thus was a biblical value. As he explained: "I think it's (communication) a biblical value. It's not one of the commandments but its part of, 'Husbands love your wives and wives be submissive to your husbands.' How can you love without communicating?"

In addition to communicating about daily activities and family life, co-researchers also expressed value in using communication to encourage their spouse. One woman understood communication as a means in which she refreshed her husband:

I think reminding him what God tells us is important. When you're hounded at work all day and everybody wants a bit a piece of you, just to come home and

know that your family just really cares for you and just really wants to nurture you, it's very encouraging I think. And then you can kind of carry on and go back to work the next day.

### Love Means They Are a Team

Participants also talked about the idea of being “one flesh” and a “team” with their spouses. One man communicated, “Because we're one flesh, we went through the storm together.” A woman described the importance of being a team with her husband:

As a team, you put each other first so that the team succeeds. Because ultimately that's what really is going to matter. If you succeed individually, the team fails.

The prima donnas aren't team workers.

A husband used a different analogy to describe how he and his wife work together: “Your marriage is like a set of lungs. You're one lung, and the spouse is the other.”

### Love is Not Conditional

Spouses conveyed that God wanted them to love their spouses unconditionally.

This woman shared her understanding of unconditional love:

It's an entirely different way of loving than I'm going to make you a coffee and I expect you to bring me breakfast in bed. And if these conditions are not met- that I have not even spoke out loud-then we say, ‘Fine, I'm not going to love anymore.’ God doesn't give us that choice. He says, ‘Love as I have loved you.’ So that means I keep loving, because God will give me the love.

Participants conveyed that loving unconditionally meant loving regardless of how their spouse responded. They tried to give love without expectation of what they would receive in turn. A male co-researcher expressed, “I don’t think we can look at what the other person has to do. All that I’m required to do is what God expects me to do. So mine is ‘Husbands, love your wives.’”

A wife stated that the ability to give unconditional love came from God: “And to love with no expectation of what you receive in return—that can only come with God fuelling the love.” Loving without expectation or condition was described as a conscious decision: “Love is a decision not a feeling. And that’s really, really key for me. I’ve made a decision to stay committed to Bill and to love Bill.”

Loving without condition was seen as valuable because it made the marriage much more stable. To love unconditionally also meant loving in all circumstances and situations, regardless of whether or not one “felt” like loving. One participant voiced:

My business is to honour God by continuing to love. In that way there is stability in the relationship because that love continues flowing no matter what the circumstances are at any given time. It takes out the element of the conditional love where ‘Well I don’t have a stomachache, and my headache seems to have passed. I think I’ll be nice to you now.’

#### Spiritual Loving is a Joyful Experience

Although the love as described above appeared that it would be difficult to sustain on a continual basis, participants shared that they gained great satisfaction in loving their spouses in this fashion. God allowed them to delight in and take great satisfaction in this spiritual kind of love. One wife shared: “God gives you joy in the loving. The closest I

can think of how to compare it is almost that giddy feeling when you've been up to some sort of mischief and it beautifully comes together." It was also described as follows:

When we love with the love God gives it's an entirely different experience. Where you can't wait to think of the next way to surprise them or love them or do something for them. God gives you such a satisfaction in doing that...and whatever they do in response is truly irrelevant because you're having such a good time loving them!

#### Receiving This Spiritual Love Helps Them to Better Understand God's Love For Them

Co-researchers conveyed that that when they were being loved by their partners with a love that came from God they gained a richer understanding of how intensely God loved them. One wife described her experience in the following manner:

Just as in marriage you have all your ups and downs and your struggles. I mean, as Christians, we're not perfect and we make lots of mistakes too and yet God still loves us and accepts us and that's a really special feeling to know that you have that. And then to know that God's giving you this person that you're learning it through too, which is really neat.

One woman cried as she shared how she had glimpsed God's love for her through her husbands love:

It tells us in the Bible how much He loves us and when it says that we're His beloved—you know, having this little glimpse of what marriage is like and then you realize that that's how God feels about us, it's just powerful. Really powerful.

#### Theme 5: A Spiritual Understanding and Experience of Sexuality

Co-researchers also described a spiritual understanding and experience of sexuality. Their conceptual framework of sex came from a biblical understanding and this positively affected their sexual intimacy with their spouse.

Sex is a Gift From God That Belongs Only in a Marriage Relationship

Spouses understood and believed that God had ordained the sexual act to be a gift from Him that should only take place in a marriage relationship. One wife shared, “He has given us instructions in the Bible that you are to have those sexual moments with one person only. And that person will be your partner, your spouse.” They emphasized that the unique sexual experience was only to occur with their spouse: “It’s a bond that’s special. And it’s only for that individual. And with nobody else. And I think that we’ll never probably really understand the whole thing until we actually get to heaven.”

One man who had chosen to be abstinent until he married, shared the benefits of being sexual with only his wife:

I think it puts Mary in a higher esteem...because then she would’ve been just another person, like the last date I had, or whatever. Whereas, because I’ve stayed...faithful until I got married, it means more. There’s only one. And there always will be only one.

Participants shared their belief that God’s plan for sex was wise because it fulfilled both the man’s and the woman’s needs. One wife expressed it this way: “God knew that their (sexual) need was strong and in marriage it could be fulfilled in such a way that the wife receives the affection and the security.”

Overall, individuals believed that sex was an act that God approved of and wanted them to enjoy: “I’ve heard it said that God stands at the foot of every bed where husband and wife are having sex, and is applauding.”

#### God Bestows Blessings Through Sex

Participants also felt that God blessed their marriage through times of sexual intimacy. One man reported that God very easily enabled him to remain faithful to his wife: “Not only have I not overcome temptation, but I am not tempted. Now that’s a gift of God.” Another credited God with giving him sexual desire for his wife and stated, “My wife is 58 right now; I’m 64. I am still to this date very much sexually attracted to her.”

Other participants shared that God had blessed them with deep intimacy through their lovemaking. One woman said that she had experienced health problems and so for a time she had not been physically intimate with her husband. However, upon becoming sexual again with her husband, she realized the blessings God gave them in those times:

I’ve seen incredible changes in our relationship when for a season I’ve covered my ears and said, ‘I don’t want to do this. I’m in pain. I have millions of excuses, right.’ His need remains. And ‘Okay God, I need the grace to be able to do this because I recognize you’ve made us this way and this is the only venue where this can be met in a Godly way. And now you have to put it together for me and walk me through it.’ And it has an incredible effect. It’s just transforming. It absolutely transforms the relationship. The man recognizes his need of the woman; they are vulnerable with each other in a way that they are never at any other times.

She continued on and shared that God had blessed them with trust and intimacy in their physical relationship:

There's no other place where you're as vulnerable with each other. It breaks down the need to compete with your spouse, to see them as the bad guy in the household. You're sort of like Adam and Eve in the most elemental sense. You're naked before each other in every way and there's a level of trust that is built by God in those times. In those moments you are face-to-face and as alone as it gets in a relationship of any kind, anywhere in the world. And God uses that to build trust.

Another wife was very descriptive in how God had used their sexual life to create a bond and connection between her and her husband:

But there is definitely a bond, a gift from God, an understanding, a knowledge that comes during that special intimate time with your husband. It's the two become one. That's kind of it in a nutshell. It's just, the passion, the warmth, the acceptance, the love—it's a whole pile of emotions all rolled up in one during that one experience.

She went on to describe it as a very spiritual experience- one in which she “glimpses heaven.”

So I definitely feel that God's a big part of that. During those times of intimacy, it's like the height of every emotion is just at a peak and, for lack of a better word, a little glimpse of heaven. Just complete bliss and happiness. And so it is a special gift from God, you know—a sexual relationship within the marriage context.

Theme 6: Spiritual Resources and Support that Enhance Marital Satisfaction

Co-researchers described another theme—that they turned to Christian resources for information and assistance in enhancing their marriages. They said that they looked to a variety of sources for help on improving overall marital satisfaction.

### Scripture

Co-researchers mentioned turning to the Bible for help in various areas of their lives. The theme of Scripture was repeated throughout the interviews. As one husband summarized, “I’ll go to the Bible and look for the answer in there. It’s kind of like the guidebook to marriage even, and to everything in life for that matter.” Another husband described God speaking to him directly through the Bible: “The Lord speaks to Isabella daily and to me daily. In His Word, through His Word, sometimes totally has nothing to do with the Word, just bang, there it is”

### Christian Books and Authors

Many spouses also talked about reading Christian marriage books and devotions. Through their readings, they gain insights into their marriages. One wife revealed how a particular book had enhanced their marriage:

We’ve read a couple of books that have been very positive for marriages and marriage relationships... we’re on our third time reading, is called Night Light by Dr. Dobson and his wife. They share something from their life in the little reading and then there are questions that you share with each other. And we found that a really positive sharing time, with Christian values in it.

Another wife shared how God used a book to draw her closer to her husband:

And so that was a Christian book and it had Christian concepts in it and that was a big part for us too, learning how to meet each others needs...it was an excellent

tool in bringing us closer together. And as far as our faith, well, I like to think that God meant for us to read that book because like I said, it does help.

Other individuals mentioned specific Christian authors, such as Dennis Rainey and Chuck Swindoll, and credited them with having a positive influence on their relationship.

### Christian Marriage Conferences

Half of the co-researchers spoke about attending Christian marriage conferences and that doing so had positive benefits of attendance on their marriage. This husband shared his reasons for going to such conferences: “We want to learn how we can have a better marriage. How to communicate better. How to handle conflict. How to have fun together. You know, we learn going to a marriage conference.”

Another described the benefits:

It’s an organization called Marriage International, which is a Christian ministry towards married couples. We sort of got involved in a more intimate way in speaking to one another about what our marriage is all about. But also, listening more to what the Lord has to say to us, personally.

One wife articulated that the conference that she and her husband attended had been a marriage-changing weekend, even though at the time they had been married for over 20 years:

But probably the biggest thing that helped both Russell and myself was when we went to a Marriage Encounter Weekend...because we really felt like we were in tune with each other emotionally. So that was a real positive turning point in our relationship.

### Christian Counsellors

A few individuals shared that talking with a Christian counsellor had helped them to have a more satisfying marriage. One woman shared that a counsellor had challenged her behaviour towards her husbands; the impact of this on her marriage had been huge. Before this time, she had been quite dissatisfied with her husband. Spending time with the counsellor had given her new insights into her marriage:

So I was talking to Michelle a lot, and she's a Christian counsellor, and she basically told me that I needed to stop being so negative and I needed to be more encouraging to Bill. And when she had me do that then I realized that yeah, he's working really hard and he's burning out of energy. And that was kind of a slap in the face but it needed to be said to me. It was a hard thing to hear but it was true.

She believed that the counsellor's intervention was a gift from God:

I think that God did put her there at that time to take and shake me up. To get me thinking about it a little more. And to draw me back into what I was supposed to be doing, instead of always being negative and tearing him down all the time.

#### Other Christians

Some participants said that their marriages had benefited from the support and encouragement of other believers. As one participant reported, "We have friendships—who encouraged us and counselled us—through our relationships in our church. And I think that that helps our marriage to be what it is today." One woman shared that a friend at church had deeply encouraged her when she had been experiencing difficulty in her marriage: "Tanya, a Christian friend from church. She's always got a listening ear and she's encouraging. And I really believe that she is a gift from God."

One husband talked about turning to other Christians for spiritual help at times when he felt powerless to help his wife. By having others help support each of them individually through trying periods he felt that some of the pressure was relieved from their marriage:

If I'm going through a tough time... She'll call people together and say 'We need to pray for Jon for this issue' and it's been vice versa. I've seen Teresa go through a tough time and I'll requisition some prayer warriors and say 'You know, we need to pray for Teresa on this.'

Others found encouragement from their Christian parents. One woman discovered that her mom had encountered some of the same marital challenges that she too had faced. Knowing that other Christians had had similar experiences helped her to accept her situation:

And at times when I would feel like I was hard done by and this marriage was for the birds and why on earth would God put us through this, my mom would say that these are all the seasons of life that God has planned for us, and she had been through them too...And realizing that in my parents being Christians they had been through it, then it gave me a peace inside too, knowing that okay, God still does love me and there is hope and this is the way it's supposed to be. I'm not hard done by and I'm not rejected. And I'm going to be okay, I'm going to survive it. And so, that was good for my mom to be there and encourage me in those times.

### Personal Prayer

Throughout the interviews, co-researchers frequently mentioned that they used prayer as a means of personal and emotional support. Talking to God about their situations and giving them over to Him to take care of them relieved some of the emotional stresses that they felt. They also prayed regularly for themselves and their spouse. One wife shared that she did this on a regular basis: “I find I have to pray for Steve regularly, both for my perspective on the issue he’s dealing with or God to give me the love to love him with properly.”

This woman also found that prayer helped her to understand her own limitations as a wife and enabled her to more accepting and less critical of her husband:

Spending that time with God where you can let your guard down and say, ‘Okay, I see his sin. But I know I’ve got plenty too, and I need you to show that to me so I can keep perspective here.’ And it just takes away that accusing mindset that is very deadly in a marriage... it’s critical that we continue being open and honest with God and ask Him to reveal our weakness and our sins. Because somehow it’s only too easy to see your spouse’s sins.

Co-researchers also mentioned that through prayer God revealed things to them about their marriages. These insights from God had profound effects on their relationships. This husband revealed that through prayer, “I, for myself, have found that I get new insights into our relationship that I never had before, that no course could give me.”

#### Theme 7: Shared Spiritual Foundations Regarding Values and Life Philosophy

Each co-researcher expressed that having a common foundation of faith was an integral part of his or her marriage.

#### Shared Meaning in Life/Shared Worldview

Shared common values, outlook, and life philosophy gave them a spiritual base from which they related to their partner, regardless of their life circumstances. One wife shared, “I think it (faith) gives us a common, underlying, belief that we know that we have that together.” Another wife understood it this way:

Because for each one of us the common understanding is that we both believe in God. And at times when we may have had difficulties or problems we still love God. And then that was the one tie between us that we still had.

Even when marriage went through rocky times, they had a solid spiritual foundation on which they used to relate to one another. One participant expressed:

And so both of us have that foundation that goes deeper than the relationship so if the relationship isn't working particularly well, it's still a foundation that we're both standing on together. So it sort of takes the pressure off the marriage relationship—it's not the bottom line.

Individuals also found that being married to a fellow Christian meant that they shared common life goals with their spouse. For one husband, spiritual maturity and growth was a goal that he and his wife shared: “It's our goal as we get older, is not to just get older but to get more mature. This means to be more of a spirit walker.”

Another spouse found that their goals as husband and wife had changed as they grew spiritually together:

I think our goals have changed. Our goals were just more looking out for ourselves and whereas now we see how we can work for what God's purpose for our lives are. And now I think we're sort of at the point where, “What does God want us to do with our lives?”

### Hope and Optimism

Co-researchers tended to convey a general life attitude of hope and optimism. They felt secure and knew that God was in control of their current lives and of all future situations that they may encounter. One wife disclosed: “You know that God isn’t going to leave you to your own devices. Knowing that He won’t, that you’re in that faith relationship, even though you might be quite badly off, you don’t feel despair.”

Another wife expressed her optimism this way:

God wants the very best for us so He’s not going to harm. In the end that we will realize that whatever happened will affect our lives in a good way. Even though it doesn’t look like it at the time.

Another said, “We have an optimistic attitude. All the problems that we can have—and we don’t have very many—are in the brackets of God’s love. And so there’s not some of the despair there.”

An optimistic attitude towards the future was conveyed in this sentiment: “The future’s in God’s hands. Things aren’t going to go out of control. And as long as we’re living on earth, we’ll be a couple that is living under God’s care.”

One woman had a general optimism that through God’s care, she and her husband’s future was secure:

We’re going to have more adventures, God’s going to open up new things to us, he’s going to teach us new perspectives, He’s going to bring new challenges, new jobs. It’s just seeing that God has our future in his hand gives us confidence and appreciation for life everyday.

### Peace About Death and Spouse Dying

Another sub-theme expressed was that participants had little fear of their own death or of their spouses' death. Both men and women of various ages expressed this sentiment. One senior citizen expressed his peace about his own death:

Death is the end for here. But there's something much more glorious ahead of us. I'm looking forward to the time I'm with the Lord where the joys are beyond what we can understand and the life is so far greater.

A wife in her 60s also felt peace about death:

At this stage of our life it's really nice for both of us to know that we have a personal relationship with God. There's nothing to worry about. If something happens to Albert and I'm left alone or something happens to me and he's left alone, or something happens to both of us...we know where we're going. So we don't need to be fearful

Some individuals talked about an inner peace that came from knowing that their spouse would go to heaven: "We don't have to be concerned about not seeing that person again or where their soul has gone to because we know that soul is with the Lord. The person is with the Lord."

One younger wife shared this viewpoint: "I mean I'll certainly miss him...But I know he is saved. I know that he has that faith so it's a complete comfort to me."

Knowing that her husband would not only go to heaven, but that she would see him again, brought comfort and peace to her:

As much as I will miss him on this earth there will be a time one of us is going to die first. But we know we will see that person in heaven again. So, I mean as

horrible as any of that would be, there is always that understanding there that they aren't completely forever gone to you.

One man summed it up in this phrase: "That brings peace to your relationship. No regrets. No 'I wish I had or had not done.' 'I wish I had known where that person went.'"

#### Outreach: Witnessing and Serving

Seven participants mentioned the value and importance of Christian outreach. This included serving others at church and witnessing to others. One man saw his entire marriage as a Christian witness to others: "If you can increase your marriage positively... you're going to be able to witness to people around you better, and including, you know, your family and co-workers."

One wife believed that spending time serving the church was an important work for her and her husband:

We both realize that we need time together and we also need time with our kids and that we can't just be selfish that way, so that we don't ever do any other things for our church or for mission projects. That there's a lot of other things too, not just our little family... There's lots of church work that needs to be done too.

Kevin, he goes to the (church board) meetings and I think it's great that he does it.

#### Theme 8: Shared Spiritual Applications in Finances and Parenting

Co-researchers expressed that because of their faith they and their spouses shared common ideas in regards to parenting and finances. All participants mentioned parenting issues, and the subject of finances was mentioned by eight of the ten participants.

#### Finances

Tithing and offerings. Participants talked about the importance of tithing (giving 10 percent of their income to the church), and how they and their spouse were in agreement on this topic. One wife stated: “We agree on the tithe—we agree that 10% off the top belongs to God and it isn’t negotiable.” This was a financial understanding that they had obtained from Scripture: “Most of our (financial) decisions were made or learned, how to make those decisions, right out of the Bible.” Others talked about how their understanding of the tithe had grown over the years. One young man said:

When we first got married it was oh, toss ten bucks in the plate...then we started tithing on our net income. And then the conviction grew. And because God’s word says that we’re to give the first fruits—not the second best of fruits—so then we started tithing on our gross income.

Others also expressed that they give more than the tithe—that they give offerings over and above the ten percent.

We started to increase our giving to 25 percent, 30 percent, 50 percent. So not only have we been blessed many times over what we ever expected to be, but it’s never a problem in what we should be doing and how much we should give.

Another stated, "As our faith has grown we think towards budgeting so that we make sure that we have donations for our church, plus missionaries.”

Couples did not disagree on giving ten percent of their income to the church; however, two individuals said that they disagreed with their spouse on how many extra offerings to give. One husband said that giving money to others is his “spiritual gift” and so his wife has to balance him in this area:

Like one of my spiritual gifts is giving. And now its like, Teresa's got to hold me back. You know, because she loves to give, but she doesn't have the spiritual gift of giving, or it ranks lower then other gifts that God has given her.

One woman, who agreed with her husband on tithing, had experienced conflict over other offerings: "But there have been disagreements about some fairly large sums of money that he felt God was telling him to give to something."

Being a steward. Participants felt that God was the one who owned their money, and that they were merely stewards of it; it was their responsibility to use their money wisely and to consider spiritual issues when making financial decisions. One contributor described, "In some ways like we aren't frivolous with our money. I think we realize we should be good stewards of our money." Another reported:

Money is a big issue with lots of families. But it's not a problem for us simply because we're looking to the Lord to give us direction. All of this belongs to him. It's not ours—we're just stewards for the short time that we're here.

God as provider. Individuals also mentioned that they understood God to be the one who provided for all their needs. They saw Him as one who stepped in and provided materially and financially for their families when they were in need. One father disclosed:

There are times that we've come short of money, and secularly I would probably be freaking out a lot of the times. But I tend to just trust it to the Lord now. And sure enough, He always manages to pay our bills off.

Another father felt the same way:

He is always going to provide, if it's in the form of a dollar bill or maybe somebody bringing food over to your house in a tough time, or clothing from

friends... There's also an acknowledgement that God has ultimately provided one way or the other.

There was also a sense that when they were good stewards and gave their tithe, that God in turn would take care of them:

And then we just were so overwhelmingly blessed and not just financially but in other areas too. Its like, as the need arises, God seems to bless us with more to meet the need... But I think the bottom line is that the more that our heart has opened to giving for God's glory, the more He's blessed us.

General financial and material values. It was expressed that material possessions were not important to them. One mother shared:

I think we have hopes and dreams of lots of nice things like a lot of people do. But we know that that's not what's most important—materialistic things. I think that we realize that those things are just earthly things.

An elderly man felt the same way: “We know people who have big homes and big homes just aren't any interest to us. We're only here for a short time and our home provides us shelter. It doesn't provide much more than that.”

### Parenting

Co-researchers also talked about how their spiritual values and beliefs have influenced their understanding of parenting and raising their children.

Valuing children. Foundationally, they believed that children were a gift from God. One dad said: “We both acknowledge that God is the ultimate creator. So we give Him the glory for giving us the children in the first place.”

They also believed that God very specifically placed their children into their families. One father had two children, one of whom was born with cystic fibrosis; he believed that God very intentionally and specifically gave his two children to him and his wife: “We both acknowledge Him for entrusting us with the kids that he’s given us, you know. He wouldn’t have given us Charles (son) with cystic fibrosis, if He didn’t think we could handle it.”

Instilling faith in children. Parents also voiced their goals for their children. They all wanted to raise their children in a Christian environment where they would know God and grow in faith. They saw it as their duty to God to raise their children to “honour” and “serve” God, to “look at life the way God would look at it,” and to “understand responsibility for the poor, sick and lost.” One mom revealed:

We want to make sure that they understand that our faith just isn’t something that happens on Sundays but that we live our faith as well. We want them to see that in us... What I want to work for is that my daughters will seek Christian men and then raise their children. To me right now that’s the only thing I want.

Another parent said:

That’s what God calls us as parents to do. Lead the children in their faith. There’s gonna come a time where they’re gonna make that decision whether they want to walk with Christ or not. That’s not up to us. But it’s up to us to disciple them to that point.

To move towards this goal parents shared their faith with them and taught them Christian principles: “We read a Bible story after supper. And then we pray before meals and again at bedtime. We try and answer their questions whenever they have them.” Parenting them

in this way meant that at times they had to “turn our back on the world and not make the same decisions other parents are making.”

Raising their children to be Christians was a rewarding experience. As one father related:

One of my little things that I am happy to see is that when I ask the kids, ‘Who loves you the most?’ that they say ‘Jesus.’ Because they know that we love them, but I want them to know as soon as they can talk that Jesus loves them the most.’

#### Theme 9: Shared Faith Rituals and Activities Promote Deeper Intimacy

Co-researchers described a variety of ways that they had shared spiritually with their husbands/wives. The spiritual relationship and connection between the spouses promoted deeper intimacy between the two individuals. As one wife put it, “I can’t really imagine having even physical, but particularly emotional intimacy, with somebody who didn’t understand my faith.”

#### Shared Prayer

Individuals shared that they enjoyed praying together with their spouses; however, it was something that they wished they did more often. When they did pray together, they found it to be enriching for their relationship. As one individual said, “The more time you pray together on a regular basis, the stronger your marriage will be.” One woman commented:

It's very deepening. I mean, you really can't do that with somebody you don't trust. It deepens trust. And it's an exposure. It's vulnerability. But it is definitely a deepening in intimacy to be able to pray like that together.

One participant told of how praying together and talking about her faith with her husband was a time of deep intimacy and sharing:

We pray together, we can talk about that whole dimension of our relationship with God and God's will and so forth. We couldn't really talk about that with somebody who didn't know what it was about. I mean you could try to educate them but you couldn't deeply share about it.

#### Devotions and Bible Studies

Doing devotions and attending Bible studies with one's spouse also helped to build intimacy. Individuals reported that doing so allowed them to get to know each other spiritually and that they learned things about their partners that they might otherwise not have known. One wife described the benefit of attending Bible study together:

I think I also learn a lot about him because I'm quite often impressed with how much he knows. Whereas, maybe it wouldn't come out otherwise. We both hear more about the other person's faith just through the answers that they give at Bible study. Or the insights that they have.

Attending a study together seems to connect them spiritually and benefit their relationship:

I've noticed it makes a difference is that when we go to Bible study as a couple. I think it's really important, that we're learning the same thing. We'll discuss it and I think that's also helped our marriage. I think that any time you study Scripture is good but I think especially when we do it as a couple.

Reading devotions together also is a time for strengthening and connecting with one's partner:

It (doing daily devotions together) helps us to go through the daily grind a lot of times. There will be a passage in there that speaks directly to what happened to us, you know, that week. And it just reaffirms our faith in God and also helps us communicate with each other and talk.

### Attending Church

All participants attended church with their spouses on a regular basis and found that it was not only beneficial to their personal spiritual lives, but it also helped to build their marriages. One wife shared, "I think certainly being a part of a church congregation and being active in...can't help but influence your marriage. Because you're looking to God. You're learning more about his direction for your life." Another wife agreed: "All I can say is that going to church is such a big, strong factor in our marriage. Through the sermon we get more knowledge, more understanding in order to be better married spouses to one another."

In short, participants agreed that, "Worshipping together as a family strengthens us."

### Being Involved in Ministry Together

Five participants shared that they had been involved in Christian ministry together with their spouses. They found that serving together drew them closer together. Ministry activities included going on mission trips, serving with the church worship bands, and working with a marriage conference organization. One mom with two young children enjoyed being able to do ministry with her husband. She reported:

Both Bill and I have a love for music and worship and singing and we've both been blessed with those talents...that's something that we can work at together... that was a special gift in having a partner who did that...even in the times where the children are busy and we don't have time for each other, that's one thing that Bill and I do do together.

Another wife shared, "Marriage Encounter has really been our ministry for over 20 years. And that was really nice to have a ministry that we could both be equally involved in. That was probably the most meaningful thing that we've ever done together."

Another woman reported that even though she and her husband had served in different areas at church, that she saw it as a "complete joy" that they both served their church and that serving in various areas of ministry together was "awesome."

### Encouraging Each Others' Faith and Spiritual Growth

Many participants also felt that their spouse was a valuable asset in regards to their spiritual growth. Some participants mentioned specific instances in their lives when their spouse had reminded them of scriptural truths in difficult times. One wife leaned on her husband for spiritual support after she suffered a miscarriage. She disclosed how her

husband had encouraged her immediately after the ultrasound revealed that their baby had died:

Two and a half years ago I had a miscarriage, which was devastating to us.... I remember him saying, 'You know that this is God's plan for our life, so we can't doubt that, you know, like we can't be angry about this. This is just something now that we have to deal with.' Basically he was saying that our faith will get us through this, our faith will help us carry on. That we need to look for God's will for our lives and so this seems to be the circumstance that we're in so let's see how God can kind of help us move on.

A husband described how he had shared biblical truths with his wife after she had learned that her brother had been seriously injured in a car accident: "I had to support her and reaffirm her on her faith and that God was in control." He later shared that spiritual encouragement had been a give and take process with his wife: "She's helped me grow in my faith and I think I've helped her grow in her faith."

Individuals also expressed that mutual spiritual encouragement and growth took place on a regular basis and in everyday circumstances. One woman expressed that she tended to worry about things a lot more than her husband. When this occurred, he reminded her of what God wants her to do with her worry: "He'll say to me, 'Well you know that God wants the best for us and so what we need to do is pray about this rather than worrying about it. Because worrying isn't going to help at all.'"

One wife admitted that it can be a difficult and humbling experience to hear God's voice through her husband: "It takes a great deal of humility to listen to your spouse tell

you something and recognize that God has spoken through them. Sometimes that's the most difficult person to hear it from."

Participants reported strong benefits from being able to grow spiritually with and because of their spouse. One husband described it this way: "I mean our faith is growing together. It's like you put two hockey players together on the same line. Sometimes they just make each other better."

A wife expressed a similar sentiment: "My faith encourages his faith and his faith encourages my faith. And it's a very constructive thing in marriage to kind of build up each other's faith, build each others relationship with God and reinforce it."

#### Theme 10: Spiritual Components of Conflict Resolution

All ten co-researchers talked about conflict with their spouse and how they resolved differences together in a godly fashion. They mentioned various ways that their faith life influenced their conflict resolution.

##### Prevention of Conflict

All co-researchers openly shared that they had disagreements with their spouses—their faith does not prevent that. However, some individuals felt it was possible that their faith limited the number and type of conflicts that they had. One husband shared that because of his faith, he has tried to be more selfless in his marriage; he believed that this led to a decrease in the number of conflicts that they have had. "It (faith) helps to prevent it (conflict) before it happens.... by trying to be the person that God wants me to be. You're not always so self-centred either. Your focus is on the other person more than it is on yourself."

A woman shared that being married to a Christian eliminated conflict that they may have had over faith differences:

Being married to a Christian person it's not like he's going to say to me, 'Oh, why do you go to church all the time?' or, 'Why do you waste so much time reading your Bible.' We both believe that that's extremely important for your own personal life.

Others said that at times God intervened in their conversations when they were in a pre-conflict stage. God helped them to stop arguments before they even began:

Sometimes we have a conversation that would lead towards confrontation and sometimes the Lord would give either me or Isabella a word that would disarm that. And it happens sometimes—where we just look at each other and say 'Well, that certainly wasn't worth fighting about or whatever.'

This husband also shared that when he struggled with something in regards to his wife he first takes it to God in prayer. He has seen that God has often stepped in and solved the problem—to the extent that he did not even have to bring it up with his wife:

He will actually intervene instead of me confronting Isabella to try to correct the situation that needs correction, improve a situation that isn't in good state. I don't need to employ my own concept of love, my own intellectual wisdom. But I can go into prayer and say, 'Lord, will you look after it? I seem to be doing a pretty rough job on this. But would you look after that?'

Spiritual Motivation and Hope in Resolving Conflict

When conflict inevitably occurred, individuals believed that their faith helped motivate them to resolve it in a timely fashion. Several people said that because divorce was not an option for them, the desire to solve conflict was strong. One woman shared:

To me, the option of separating isn't there, so therefore we know we're in it together. He's going to be around and I'm going to be, so I mean we can fight and make life miserable or we can disagree forever and have our problems. Or we can work through it... We know that anything that comes up, that we're to work through it together. Because we are together until the end.

Another wife agreed that viewing marriage as permanent helped resolve conflict: "When things aren't going well, you don't think about divorce, you don't think about splitting up. You think about 'So what are we going to do about this?'"

Participants described that they did not stay angry with their spouses for a long period of time because they knew that eventually they would choose to make up with them.

It makes a huge difference to know that you can be really, totally mad at each other for a while but at the end of that will be forgiveness. And that eventually reduces the length of time of staying mad because you know you're going to have to forgive anyway so you might as well get on with it fairly soon.

Co-researchers also stated that when disagreements and conflicts were high, they still felt hopeful. They were certain that God would carry their marriage through their struggles.

So at times when there's something seriously wrong with your marriage... You're still married and you're still both Christians and you're still standing on that rock

of Christ and so you kind of know that something's going to have to get better.

Like there's hope.

One wife put it this way: "There's the big picture that although the situation might be quite bad...there's so just much outside of the situation. There's the whole spiritual reality of God being there and God having you in his care."

Prayer: Individually and as a Couple

Co-researchers commonly talked about using prayer as a method of helping to resolve conflict. Sometimes couples prayed together during conflict, while at other times a spouse would pray on his/her own and ask God for help in solving the dispute. One husband said that he and his wife often turned their conflicts over to God through shared prayer. "And then we'll find out that instead of us being the ones that are able to solve problems, we are now intercessors. And God is the problem solver." One man said that when they invited God into their troubles He gave them His peace:

Whenever I am cross with my wife, or she is, to actually go to the other person and say, 'Let's together pray.' And the Lord hasn't failed us to really put things back together, whatever it is. And after the prayer together--this doesn't have to be all that long, sometimes 10, 15 minutes--the peace of the Lord comes on us and whatever our strife is, whatever our concern or reasons for bickering, it'll just fade away

Others shared their experience of praying on their own. One husband told it this way:

The other night we had a little discussion about something and it didn't end up the way it should've and I went off by myself and I started talking to God about this... It's amazing how you can get back into a right relationship again.

A wife said that she asked God for wisdom in the situation:

What would God want me to do in this situation, where you're really annoyed at the other person for whatever reason? And you stop and think about it and pray about it and say, 'Okay how should I deal with this?' instead of hollering or being miserable.

A different woman said that through prayer, God has given her insights in solving long-term issues between her and her husband. "Sometimes in time with God and prayer, God will just give you a slightly different perspective on something that's maybe been a long-standing issue between you and your spouse, and will enable you to see their side."

#### God's Intervention and Guidance

Some participants also described God intervening in their conflicts and guiding them as to what they should do. In this sense, God had a very active and practical role in resolving their conflict. One man said that often God intervened in the midst of their conflict and, "There's a reconciliation that happens. Even without our doing." One wife described how God helped her to understand her husband's point of view: "And I don't know how else to explain it, but He interceded and helped me to stop self-looking at the problem and forced me to turn around and look at the other side of the problem."

Another said that God helped her to control her words when she was angry with her husband. "Again, knowing that God is in control and He kind of guides and directs you and helps you to keep your mouth shut sometimes when you would say something."

One woman described her utter confidence that God would help her and her husband resolve their differences: "He knew what the struggles would be. But He is so much bigger than the struggles that He'll work it out."

Reconciliation: Confession and Forgiveness

Participants talked at great length regarding the process of reconciliation that they have engaged in with their partners. They described a two-step process. First, they confessed and admitted to their partners how they sinned in the conflict, and admitted what they had done wrong. One husband shared: “I have to repent for my action towards her when I made life miserable for her. Really repent. Repent to her as well as to the Lord.”

They described the confession as a humbling experience: “You kind of have to say, ‘I was wrong’ which is really hard to say. And it is a very humbling thing to admit that I was totally wrong.” They also believed that confession was unique to the Christian faith and that the “world never does this.”

The second step involved forgiveness. Participants both asked for forgiveness and also forgave their spouses. They described forgiveness as a crucial spiritual factor in working through their conflict. One husband stated, “I’d say the element of forgiveness allows the restoration of conflict...you feel rejoiced through forgiveness. And as it says in the Bible...don’t expect to be forgiven by your Father, unless you can forgive someone that’s wronged you.”

Another woman described the spiritual importance of forgiving. “We’re told to forgive and we’re not to be holding and harbouring harsh feelings towards one another. We’re supposed to be in love and unity with all people but especially to your spouse.”

As this participant stated, “There is not an alternative to just hold a grudge and say ‘Okay, we’re going to hold that against you forever.’ Because forgiveness is not optional. If you are serious about your faith you have to forgive.”

A man described the importance of forgiveness like this:

I feel the only way we can get through those valleys and back to the times of rejoicing together is through forgiveness. And if you don't have that element of forgiveness, unconditional forgiveness, then there's always going to be something festering that could come up later. It just becomes cancerous. But the practice of unconditional forgiveness in your heart wipes the slate clean. Forgiveness will keep the trajectory of you both working towards each other again.

A woman shared:

I think that people sometimes have a hard time loving each other because they resent things or they hold grudges. And what Jesus has taught us is that you forgive something and then it's forgotten.

Individuals also emphasized the importance of not bringing up things that have already been forgiven.

I think a lot of it too is not keeping records. Not keeping track of how many times you didn't get your way or how many times you had to let the other person choose. I think that's a really key part to forgiving and letting things stay in the past.

A wife described it this way:

I can bother him about it for years and years or I can forgive him and say 'I'm going to trust you Lord.'

One woman summed up the process of reconciliation with this personal description:

Because you really have a lot of mistakes in marriage and I've made quite a few too and when you're a Christian and when you have those situations, at the end of

the day you can take and say ‘Alright, I really screwed up today. Do you forgive me? Do you still love me?’ And we can work through what happened and that we don’t want it to happen again and pray about it which is nice, and go to bed with that peace that everything is okay.

#### Theme 11: Spiritual and Faith Challenges to the Marital Relationship

During the interviews, individuals talked about the many benefits and the positive influence that their Christian faith had on their marriage. When asked if their faith ever had a negative influence, the majority said it did not. However, there were two instances when a few co-researchers thought that their faith brought unique conflicts to their relationship.

#### Differences in Faith Maturity

One wife shared that marital differences and challenges occurred when the husband and wife were at different stages of spiritual growth and maturity. She shared, “I think the only time that I can see difficulty is when one of us has walked along further in faith than the other... When our understanding of what God calls us to be as his people, when those things are not matching.”

#### Disagreement as to How God is Leading

When two spouses prayed and asked God for specific guidance in an area, they sometimes disagreed as to where they thought God was leading them. These differences then created conflict over what they should do. One wife described:

In our marriage Ivan is a very strong prayer (sic). And a very strongly spirit-led individual. And at times it can become sort of a firewall that he puts up. ‘Well you know, I’ve talked to God about this so don’t bug me about it.’

At times, this husband has felt led by God to do something that she had not felt God's leading in:

If Ivan does something which I feel was irresponsible or dumb or just not the right thing to do, not the right decision and he says, 'Well I prayed about that, and I feel that is what God is leading me to do.' That's probably the thing that we struggle with most at this point.

#### Theme 12: Personal Faith Positively Affects the Marriage Relationship

Participants talked about how their faith had an overarching positive influence on themselves and on their marriage.

#### Marriage and Faith are Intertwined

Many expressed that it was difficult for them to tease out the influence of their faith on their marriage because their marriage and faith were so deeply intertwined. "It's very difficult to segregate (faith and marriage). Because I see marriage being a vital part in my whole being and my relationship with the Lord." Another reported, "It's hard to separate the Christian influence on marriage when it's been so much a part of our life ever since we've been married. I have a hard time differentiating there." A third co-researcher said, "I think that for me my faith is such a big part of who I am. And I intertwine it in every aspect of my life."

#### Faith Changes Individuals in Positive Ways

A requirement of being in this research project was that individuals regularly participated in prayer, Bible reading, and church attendance. Throughout the interviews, participants mentioned their personal relationship with God and its importance in their lives. They believed that God had changed them as individuals, which thus had a positive

influence on their marriage. One man, who said he was not a practicing Christian when he was first married, had drunk heavily. When he began truly leaning on God, God had changed his drinking habits:

There was a time...where I drank *very* heavily. My wife got very annoyed with me—I can see why. The drinking was just a symptom, sort of, but there was a selfishness underlying the whole thing...But the Lord knows when to rescue people and He came to rescue.

Others described how God and the Holy Spirit had changed their attitudes and had had a general positive influence on their behaviour and actions:

All of the things that I had been seeking before on my own and wasn't able to attain, to be kind to her, to be patient, to be loving altogether. They became part of me—not because of trying to do so, but by putting Jesus first.

One participant shared that his faith helped him to become more patient with his wife:

I was the most impatient guy that ever lived on this earth. And I was given patience just like a gift. All of a sudden I had it. Before I didn't have it, and I didn't even ask for it! But I got it. Even today, I could be very, very patient, and anybody who'd know me before would say, 'That's not the same guy.' But it came, just like a benefit to me, out of that change in attitude of laying yourself down and lifting up Jesus and saying, 'You're in charge.'...What I newly discovered was a peace, a gentleness towards my wife, a patience.

God also helped remove his anxiety and worry:

My anxiety was gone. Because I didn't have to be anxious to try to be able to accomplish it anymore. I could now rely on somebody who was able to do it for

me, who was much better equipped. Jesus in me can work a whole lot more than I ever could on my own.

Others found that God changed them, but in less dramatic manners. One wife described being changed by the Holy Spirit as a more gentle and “subtle” process that occurred over time.

### Theme 13: Spiritual Gratitude for Spouse

Co-researchers repeatedly mentioned the theme of being grateful and thankful to God for their spouses. They viewed their husbands/wives as a gift and a blessing from God. Seeing them in this manner led to a deep cherishing and appreciation of their partners. This attitude of gratefulness seemed to be foundational to the co-researchers. As one wife shared, “Seeing your spouse as a gift from God is a huge starting point for me.” Another stated, “I believe that they (spouse and children) are gifts. Because of that then I cherish them that much more.”

One husband, married for over three decades, said that God often reminded him to be thankful:

Giving thanks for my wife I think is the most recurring word from the Lord that I get regarding our marriage. And the other one is to treasure her. It’s very easy for a marriage that is in the works for a long time, like 33 years, that you start taking each other for granted. I think that’s why He reminded me, “Don’t take her for granted. Just treasure her. Really appreciate her.

One wife recalled a specific incident at a worship conference when she realized how blessed she was to have her husband and children. As she spoke of this memory, she wept:

Bill was praising God and he'd raised his hands and he was singing. And I turned around and looked and Bridget was looking up at her daddy and she was mimicking him. That image has always stuck with me because I thought 'Wow, how lucky I am that both these people in my life who mean so much to me have chose to praise God.'

Another wife shared that on a daily basis she felt deep gratitude to God for her spouse and family:

I am extremely thankful for him. That he comes home from work, that God has given him to me and that we have the children that we have. When I go to bed at night and I think of my two daughters and my husband sleeping beside me, I just know that they're the best gifts from God.

#### Common Story

The following description represents the co-researchers' experiences of how their Christian faith influenced their marriage and their relationship with their spouse.

Some co-researchers said that God influenced their marriages even before they were married. Those who were practicing Christians when they were single said that they had desired a spouse who would share their beliefs because "God calls us to be equally yoked." While dating, they "prayed" and asked for God's guidance as to whether or not they should marry. All individuals felt that God had a divine and "specific plan" and purpose in bringing them together with their spouses, and described God as their "matchmaker."

Individuals shared their spiritual understandings of the origin and design of marriage. They saw God as the creator of marriage and Satan as the opponent of healthy relationships. Marriage was regarded as a lifetime commitment where a man and a woman leave their families of origin and “cleave” to their spouses to create their own family. The marriage commitment, made before God, was described as a decision to stay together “till death do us part” and “no matter what the circumstances.” Divorce was not an option. Participants also shared that putting God as the highest priority in their lives, even over their spouses, enhanced their marriages.

Some women reported that their husbands had the ultimate decision-making role in their marriages. Based on Christ as the head of the church, they believed that it was a God-given role for the husband to wisely lead his family in matters where, after having discussed the subject, the husband and wife could not reach a mutual decision. Some wives chose to “defer” to their husbands decisions because “Christ ordained the family in this way.” They prayed for their husbands decisions and “trusted that God will lead” him.

The other five participants reported that their marriages were more egalitarian, with no one person having the final say. The method of decision-making tended to vary with the circumstances. One participant said that both he and his wife submitted to one another when they could not agree, and took turns yielding to the other. Often the person who was able to be more objective in the situation would make the decision. Another said that decisions were not made unless both were in agreement regarding the issue at hand.

God was described as an active presence and participant in marriage. He was the “third person” in their relationships who held their marriages together and who supplied them with strength and resilience during difficult times. Participants spoke of their belief

that “God will help us to stay married” and trusted that “God is carrying us” when they faced trials.

In regards to love, participants reported that their faith had greatly influenced their understanding of love and how they showed love to their spouses. First of all, they believed that “God gives us love” and that He was the source of their love. They found that Scripture provided guidance on how to love their spouses and that Jesus was their inspiration in understanding how to love. Through prayer, God also provided them with very specific and unique ideas on how to show love to their partners. When they followed God’s leading in this area, their demonstrations of love were “a real bulls eye,” “effective,” and had “great effects” that were “not expected.”

Co-researchers described specific attributes of love. One attribute was that they strived to accept and value their spouses just as they were. They reported that love meant “accepting them good and bad” and believed that gender differences existed because “God made us differently” and were used to “complete” each other. Love also involved “sacrifice” and selflessness. One husband said that he tried to “think of her first as opposed to myself first”. Love included open communication with each other and they described their relationships as a “team.” Another attribute of love was that it was not conditional. God helped them to give love with “no expectation of what you receive in return.” As one wife put it, “there is stability in the relationship because that love continues flowing no matter what the circumstances are at any given time.”

There was deep spiritual and personal satisfaction when they received and gave love to their spouses. It was described as a “giddy” experience that was filled with “joy.” Receiving love from their spouses was described as “really powerful.” Receiving

unconditional love gave them spiritual insight and helped them to “realize that that’s how God feels about us”.

Physical intimacy is a vital part of marriage and co-researchers shared their spiritual understandings and experiences of sexuality. They saw sex as a “special gift from God” that was to be experienced only within the marital relationship. Participants believed that God blessed their marriage through times of sexual intimacy. During sex they experienced a “level of trust that is built by God in those times,” and felt that it “transformed” their relationships. They described sexual intimacy in spiritual terms where the “two become one” and as a time when they “glimpse heaven.”

Participants talked about the importance of continually working on their marriages. To enhance their relationships they turned to Christian resources such as books, marriage conferences, counsellors, the advice and support of other Christians, and prayer.

Having a common foundation of faith was an integral part of their marriages. During trying times in their relationships, faith was a “foundation” and “common understanding” that the husband and wife still shared. Co-researchers also shared spiritually “optimistic” and “hopeful” outlooks on life. They believed that their lives were within the “brackets of God’s love” and that they were “living under God’s care.” Shared faith also gave participants peace about their own death and their spouses’ deaths. They knew that they would both go to heaven where “joys are beyond what we can understand.” It comforted and reassured them to know that they would “see that person in heaven again.” Participants also mentioned that because of their shared beliefs they valued witnessing to others and serving the church.

Practically speaking, faith had a strong influence in the areas of finances and parenting. Their spiritual beliefs gave them and their spouses' common values and goals in these two areas. In regards to finances, faith led them to tithe regularly and to give additional offerings. They felt that they were "stewards" of God's money and thus strived to use their money responsibly and wisely. As such, finances were rarely an area of disagreement because participants described themselves as "looking to the Lord to give us direction." God was seen as the "provider" of all their financial and material needs. In general, possessions were not highly sought after; they were seen as "just earthly things" that had no lasting or eternal value.

Faith also influenced how co-researchers and their spouses parented. As a foundation, they viewed their children as gifts from God. Their parenting goals were very spiritually oriented. One mother said that her goal was to raise Christian children who "understand that our faith just isn't something that happens on Sundays, but that we live our faith as well." A father shared that his goal was that his children would know that "Jesus loves them the most."

Shared faith rituals and activities brought participants closer to their spouses. After shared prayer or devotions with their spouses, they described a "deepening in intimacy" that helped them to "communicate with each other" in more profound ways. Attending church together was important and they found that "worshipping together strengthens us." Sharing in various ministries together was described as very "meaningful." Participants also reported that their spouses spiritually encouraged them and helped them to "grow in my faith" on both a daily basis as well as during difficult

circumstances. In challenging times, spouses were a spiritual support who reminded them to “look for God’s will” in their lives and to turn to God with worries and frustrations.

All relationships endure conflict and co-researchers reported that their Christian beliefs changed the way that conflict was handled and resolved in their marriages. To begin with, they believed that the number of conflicts they had were decreased because their faith asked them to be selfless. The act of “trying to be the person that God wants me to be” eliminated some conflicts before they began. As well, participants found that after they had prayed about an issue and asked God to handle it for them, some issues were resolved without ever having to discuss them.

When conflict inevitably occurred, individuals thought that their faith helped them to resolve it in a timely fashion. Because divorce was not an option and forgiveness was a faith requirement, they were motivated to solve their problems and felt confident that God would carry them through their struggles. Praying together or individually about their disputes sometimes brought dramatic, healing results: “After the prayer together the peace of the Lord comes on us and whatever our strife is, whatever our concern or reasons for bickering, it’ll just fade away.” God also directly “interceded” and “guided” them in the healing process. They said that God helped them to “look at the other side of the problem” and to control their words during arguments.

The act of reconciliation after conflict involved two steps: confession of sin to the spouse, and forgiveness. Spouses “admitted” to each what they had done wrong and “repented” for their actions. They then forgave their partners, which co-researchers described as being a crucial spiritual factor as they worked through their conflict. Forgiveness was described as an action that “wiped the slate clean” and was “not

optional” because Christ commanded it. Forgiveness also involved “not keeping records” of previous mistakes and “letting things stay in the past.”

There were a few instances when participants shared that their faith had brought unique conflicts to their marriage. One challenge occurred when there was disparity between the two spouses in their spiritual growth and faith maturity. One individual shared that difficulty arose when “one of us has walked along further in faith than the other...when our understanding of what God calls us to be as his people, when those things are not matching.” The second conflict arose when the husband and wife, after they had prayed about a situation, still disagreed as to where or how God was leading them.

Participants shared that their faith had a general positive influence on themselves and on their marriages. It was difficult for them to tease out how or why because they regarded their marriage and faith as deeply “intertwined.” However, they recognized that their faith and the work of the Holy Spirit had changed them as individuals, which, therefore, had had positive repercussions on their marriages. Participants described various ways that God had changed them. Through their faith some stopped drinking heavily, became “very patient” and “gentle,” and were no longer filled with “anxiety” and “worry.”

Co-researchers also described being very grateful and thankful to God for their spouses. They saw their spouses as blessings and a “gift from God.” Because of this they “cherished” and “treasured” them. One wife shared:

I am extremely thankful for him...that God has given him to me and that we have the children that we have. When I go to bed at night and I think of my two daughters and my husband sleeping beside me, I just know that they're the best gifts from God.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

### Summary of Purpose and Results

This study had the purpose of examining the lived experiences of Christian marriage partners, and sought to understand the myriad of ways that faith influences their marriage relationships. The phenomenological approach was specifically chosen. This approach has seldom been used in Christian marriage literature, and this methodology allows one to explore and understand the phenomenon in more of its complexity and richness. Interviewing marriage partners allows for the emergence of themes regarding how faith and God has an impact on the relationship.

Ten individuals were interviewed (five women and five men) and were asked to share their experiences of how their Christian faith influences their marriage and their relationship with their spouse. Individuals had to meet requirements that defined themselves as a practicing Christian. They also had to be married for five years or more, in order to provide a rich and full description of the phenomenon. Analysis of the data reveals thirteen themes and 50 sub-themes.

This chapter examines the above results and views them in light of existing research. Themes are discussed according to current theories and knowledge as presented in Chapter II. Following this is an examination of the limitations of this current research study. This section concludes with a discussion on the implications of these findings for counsellors and pastors, as well as areas of further research.

#### Relation of Results to Existing Research

This subsection explores how the current research findings are linked and related to existing research and theories. First, themes that are confirmed and validated by existing literature are discussed. Following that is an exploration of the thematic descriptions that do not appear to have been revealed in previous research on Christian marriages. These themes, unique to this research, are further examined.

#### Themes Consistent with Existing Research and Literature

Religiosity has been often explored in marriage and faith research. Religiosity seems difficult to measure in quantitative terms that has been used in prior research. In this study, “religiosity” is defined as one who is a “practicing Christian”; the term “practicing Christian” is defined as one who attends church regularly, reads the Bible regularly, and prays regularly. This differs from research that measures religiosity by

statistics such as frequency of church attendance or church affiliation. The “practicing Christian” understanding in this study is thought to be a more valuable way to determine one’s level of intrinsic religiosity.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, participants have a sense of “spirituality” rather than religiosity (meaning that it was a personal and growing faith (Giblin, 1991). It is intended that the co-researchers are individuals who “lived” their faith on a daily basis and who have an intimate relationship with God.

All co-researchers are religiously homogamous with their spouses; they attend the same church together. Thus, research that examines the religiosity and religious homogamy of married couples is somewhat related to this study.

It is important to note that existing research on religion and marriage is quite lacking in theoretical foundations. As Sullivan (2001) states, the “largest impediment” to understanding this subject area is quite likely due to the fact that much research has been “empirically driven rather than theory driven” (p. 611). Psychology has failed to yet connect religion and family into unifying theories or foundations. Thus, while data and statistics exist, theory in which to find meanings behind the numbers and to unify results of various research results, is lacking. As Snarey and Dollahite (2001) note, there is “clearly a lack of...good middle-range theories explaining the complex relationships between familial and religious processes, not to mention an overarching theory linking religion, marriage, and family” (p. 649)

### Types of Marriages

Bellah et al. (1996) describes marriages as being either traditional or therapeutic.

Traditional marriages are Protestant marriages in which gender roles are more traditional

<sup>9</sup>The idea of “intrinsic faith” is taken from the Religious Orientation Scale developed by Gordon Allport. He defined intrinsic faith as being “subordination of personal motives and practices to precepts of one’s religion.” Only those who have an intrinsic faith are considered by Allport to be spiritually mature. (Anthony, 1993, p. 102)

and the relationship is more patriarchal. In this sense, some of the couples in this study would fit this description and confirm his theory. The remaining marriages would seem to fall under the category of “interdependent,” a phrase coined by Cancian (1987). These relationships are perceived as ideal because they involve gender role flexibility, self-development, commitment to the marriage, and dependence on one other.

### Religiosity, Spirituality, and Marital Satisfaction

Previous research seems to support the idea that couples with similar religious beliefs will experience greater marital satisfaction (Glenn, 1984; Heaton, 1982). This is affirmed in this study; all individuals share similar religious beliefs and activities with their partners and are deeply thankful and appreciative of their marriage relationships (see Theme 12, Spiritual Gratitude for Spouse).

One of the basic findings of previous marriage research is that marriage partners who share similar religious values, norms, and beliefs adjust easier to one another, have less conflict in their relationship, enjoy greater marital satisfaction, and more permanent unions (Booth & Johnson, 1995; Dudley & Kosinski, 1990; Hunt & King, 1978; Ortega et al., 1988; Snow & Compton, 1996). In general, these ideas were affirmed in this study (note that the notion of marital adjustment is not mentioned by participants).

More specifically, Ortega et al. (1988) theorizes that common beliefs and values assist spouses when making decisions about the raising of children, education, allocation of money, and leisure activities. This theory is confirmed. Co-researchers describe having similar life values and philosophies in general (Theme 7: Shared Spiritual Foundations Regarding Values and Life Philosophy), as well as common ideas regarding finances and parenting (Theme 8: Shared Spiritual Applications in Finances and Parenting). In more

general terms, spouses shared values regarding what marriage is (Theme 2: A Spiritual Understanding of the Origin and Design of Marriage), their understanding of love (Theme 4: A Spiritual Understanding and Experience of Love), and beliefs surrounding sexuality (Theme 5: A Spiritual Understanding and Experience of Sexuality). Their common beliefs were lived out with their spouses as they shared in faith rituals and activities together (Theme 9: Shared Faith Rituals and Activities Promote Deeper Intimacy).

Participants do not speak to the idea of adjusting to one other, but they do share about conflict and permanence of their relationships. They believe that some conflict was prevented because of their faith, that their Christian faith leads them to be motivated to resolve conflict quickly, and that God assists them in resolving disagreements (Theme 10: Spiritual Components of Conflict Resolution). They also speak of the utter permanence of their marriages and state that divorce is not an option for them.

Heaton (1990) suggests that couples who share the same faith may have a more common social network of friends, family, and religious advisors and that this social network may aid couples in working through their problems, and thus promote marital stability. This is confirmed in Theme 6: Spiritual Resources and Support that Enhance Marital Satisfaction. In this theme, participants share that they turned to Christian counsellors, books, and other Christian individuals for support and assistance in both restoring and enhancing their relationships.

Giblin (1997) took previous studies a step farther by examining the idea of “spirituality”<sup>10</sup> (rather than religiosity), between couples and found that there is a positive relationship between spirituality and relationship satisfaction. Spirituality scores are

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<sup>10</sup> Spirituality is ideally a flexible, meaningful, individual belief system that allows for intellectual growth and reflection, involves community experiences and relationships, and includes moral accountability (Giblin, 1997)

significantly related to aspects of marriage such as communication, conflict resolution, sexual relationship, and decision-making. Again, his findings are congruent with this study's findings.

Lehrer and Chiswick (1993) find that shared religiosity between husband and wife increases marital companionship and intimacy. This is confirmed throughout the research themes, especially Theme 9 (Shared Faith Rituals and Activities Promote Deeper Intimacy). Co-researchers describe stronger connections and deep intimacy with their spouses that they attribute to the spiritual relationship and connection between them. Shared prayer, devotions, church attendance, shared ministry, and encouraging each other spiritually bond them in ways that go farther than emotional or physical intimacy.

#### Theory on Love

The ideas of love, as expressed in Theme 4 (A Spiritual Understanding and Experience of Love), were mentioned by Anthony (1993). He theorizes that people with intrinsic faith<sup>11</sup> enjoy happy marriages because such individuals are more selfless and giving. When participants talk about their spiritual understanding of love, they specifically mention being self-less in their marriages and thinking of their spouses needs about their own.

The type of love that the co-researchers describe is congruent with biblical understandings of love. Palmer (1977) purports that a Christian understanding of love is based on the idea that human love is an imitation of God's love; God's love is based on his conscious decision to love (see 1 John 4). It is also an everlasting love (Morris, 1981). Therefore, if Christian spouses are to love with a love that stems from God, this love will

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<sup>11</sup> A degree of spiritual maturity as defined by Gordon Allport's Religious Orientation Scale, used by Michael Anthony (1993). Only individuals who fall into the category of intrinsic faith are considered by Allport to be spiritually mature

be based on a decision or a choice to love their marriage partners for as long as they live. Participants affirm this idea of decision-based love. They speak of their vow and commitment to their spouses as being integral to their marriage; they also report that they chose to act in certain loving ways (i.e., they chose to be selfless, to accept and value their spouse, to communicate). Co-researchers understand that love is not just an emotion or a feeling, but it is a decision to act in ways that were loving, even though this is not always easy.

Palmer (1977) writes of the significance of the Greek word *agape* in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul uses this word in 1 Corinthians 13 to describe a new and radical type of love. *Agape* love is pictured as being all encompassing love, a love that includes notions of universality, freedom, justice, and durability. Paul says that *agape* love includes virtues such as patience, kindness, selflessness, rejoicing in good, hope, and endurance; *agape* love does not include arrogance, rudeness, irritability, or resentment. The love that the co-researchers attempt to describe fits into this category of *agape* love. They speak of love involving selflessness, deferring to the other persons' desires, joy, unconditional acceptance, and permanence. Although no participant uses the word *agape* love, or spoke of 1 Corinthians 13, they spoke of using the Bible to help them understand what love should look like. They also said that God is the source of their love. It is obvious that some of this *agape* love of God is indeed reflected to participants through their spouses because they reveal that receiving this spiritual love from their spouses enables them to better grasp the breadth and depth of God's love for them as individuals.

*Agape* love also includes an ability to view human sin and to deal with it (Palmer, 1977). *Agape* love is reality oriented; *agape* love is able to love even when the

performance of an individual is bad or sinful or even evil. Agape is a love given “quite irrespective of merit” (Morris, 1981, p. 128). Co-researchers talk about this when they share about dealing with conflict. They describe confessing their sins to their spouses, and asking for and receiving forgiveness. Scripture reveals that God’s love is constant, despite humans being unworthy and sinful (Morris); likewise, spouses are called to love each other despite flaws, sins, and mistakes. Participants share that it is their goal and desire to let God be the source of their love so that they can continue to love even when they do not feel like it, or when their spouse does not seem worthy of love.

### Psychological Theory

David’s (1979) psychological interpretation of why intrinsic religious beliefs and spirituality have a positive and stabilizing effect on the marital relationship was related to this study and its results. David compares the Christian marital triangle (God, wife, husband) with Murray Bowen’s theory of Triangles. David (1979) explains Bowen’s theory as follows: Bowen proposed that the triangle, as a three-person system, is the smallest possible stable relationship system. Two individuals can co-exist alone for a period of time, until conflict arises. As anxiety is created, the third person is invited into the triangle in order to act as a de-escalating and stabilizing force. The focus is taken off of the dyad and is shifted onto the outside person. When one triangle contains too much tension, other triangles become involved and can form many interlocking triangular systems.

David proposes that the third person in the triangle of a Christian marriage relationship is Christ. Marital stability and conflict can be reduced when one or both partners invite Christ to participate in their relationship.

In this study it is very clear that participants understand God to be a vital third part and presence in their marriages. Many participants directly describe God as the third person in their relationship. It seems likely that these research participants would agree with the analogy of Christ (or God) being the third part of their marriage triangle.

Participants also describe God as being a stabilizing presence in their marital conflicts. As David (1979) proposes, the participants believe that they experience less conflict because God is a vital part of their relationship. They see God as someone who helps them to avoid conflict initially because God asks them to act selflessly. Once conflict occurs, they describe turning their problems over to God and asking God to solve them. Participants also report that praying to God often brings peace into their relationships. They say that they tend to remain hopeful about their relationship even while in the midst of conflict because they are confident that God will intervene and enable them to resolve their issues. In this sense, David's theory is confirmed by these co-researchers.

However, while David's (1979) theory that God acts as a balancing piece in the marital triangle appears to be affirmed by these co-researchers, Christian couples in this study describe God as being much more than merely a stabilizing factor in their relationship. God is seen as an actual presence or person in their relationship, and one who has a myriad of roles. They see Him as a role model (i.e., He shows them how to love), and as one who gives them hope and emotional security. He is the source of all their life values and beliefs, and He guides them in their decision-making. Christ is described as one who gives them purpose in their earthly lives and who gives them

eternal life when they died. Thus, Christ has a much deeper and more profound role than merely a third person that stabilizes relationships in difficult times.

Christians in this research study may even be offended at David's (1979) extension of Bowen's theory in explaining Christ's role in their marriage. They would most likely understand God as someone who wants to be a much larger part of their lives and their marriages than just a balancing factor that assists them during conflict.

According to Bowen's theory (David, 1979) any third presence (such as a child, an in-law, or even a belief in a deity other than Christ) could hypothetically act as the balancing force in conflict. It could be surmised that participants would agree that Christ does indeed help them to resolve conflict but that He does so in a much deeper and personal manner than any other human would be capable of doing. They would most likely see Christ's role as being very unique from any other potential third presence in marriage. For example, they may believe that Christ changes how they view conflict (i.e., that he helps them to be more interested in pleasing God by responding lovingly during conflict rather than focusing on winning the argument), and that the Holy Spirit changes how they respond during conflict (i.e., a desire to make peace; asking God what He wants the resolution to look like, rather than focusing on what each individual wants; responding with kind words when one's partner is angry).

### Sexual Intimacy

Research examines the idea that sexuality and spirituality are connected (MacKnee, 1997, 2002). MacKnee (1997) proposes that the condition of being incomplete drives people to desire connections with others; this plays out in both sexual and spiritual pursuits. During sexual intimacy men and women momentarily regain the

oneness and completeness that was experienced by Adam and Eve before the fall. MacKnee further suggests that the spiritual and sexual aspects of human experience might be so meshed that it is difficult to arouse one desire without arousing the other; the giving of oneself completely to God may assist spouses in giving themselves fully to their partners. The experiences of these Christian co-researchers support his theory. They describe sexuality intimacy as a time when they connect with their spouse deeply, and when the “two become one”. They are devoted to God and experience their sexuality as a time when they give themselves fully to their spouses; they are most vulnerable and trusting in these times and see God as integral to their intimacy.

MacKnee (2002) examines the sexual and spiritual encounters of ten Christians. Through phenomenological interviews he found 17 themes. In particular, the participants of the present study experiences his two identified themes of “Intense Union” and “Transformation and Healing” (pp. 238–239). The theme of “Intense Union” (where spouses sense oneness and a connection so intense that they are incredibly vulnerable) is also described by the co-researchers in this study; they experience sexual connection where “it’s like the height of every emotion is just at a peak and...a little glimpse of heaven.” The theme of “Transformation and Healing” is an after-effect where renewal and restoration occur. Again, co-researchers in this study also describe sexual intimacy as a “transforming” experience in the marriage relationship where trust and vulnerability are built.

### Unique Aspects of the Research

#### Methodology

There are two major ways that this research is unique and adds new dimensions to the existing literature on Christian marriage. Firstly, there are very few qualitative studies done in this area. Robinson (1994) and Dudley and Kosinski (1990) have done some of the only published work in this field. Robinson interviewed 15 happily married couples and found that almost all of the subjects describe their faith as being a great asset in the marriage. Although she had not sought religious participants, she discovered that co-researchers often credited spirituality with having a positive influence on intimacy, commitment, communication, and resolution of conflict. Faith also provided them with emotional, social, and spiritual support. Her participants also mentioned prayer and reading of Scripture. Her research seems to match up and fit quite well with the results of this study. The uniqueness of this study is that it specifically examines Christian marriages and seeks to learn more about their relationships; Robinson came across her findings rather accidentally and her research was not geared specifically towards Christians.

Dudley and Kosinski (1990) include an optional free response question in their quantitative study, asking participants what effect religion has on their marriage relationship. The answers to this question reveal that faith helps the individuals in their marriages to think of the needs of others, be more loving, be respectful, and resolve conflicts. These findings are consistent with the results of this study; however, results in this study are much more in depth and specific. Many more themes are found in this research, most likely because this was the sole focus of the study and because of use of in-depth interviews.

### Unique Themes

This present research is valuable not only because of its methodology, but because of the great breadth of its findings. This is an in-depth exploration of the experience of Christian faith influencing the marriage relationship. To date, no other such phenomenological study has been published. The findings are all encompassing, and reveal many unique themes that have been undisclosed in the past. Themes such as: Spiritual Leading in Choosing a Spouse, A Spiritual Experience of God Being an Active Participant in the Marriage, A Spiritual Understanding and Experience of Love, Spiritual and Faith Challenges to the Marital Relationship, and Spiritual Gratitude for Spouse, are new findings and bring fresh insights into marriage research.

For instance, some single individuals experience anxiety in regards to being single; they wonder whether or not they will ever marry, and whether or not their current dating partner or fiancé is someone that they should marry. This current research reveals how practicing Christians deal with questions surrounding their singleness and their decision to marry. They describe asking God to guide them in the decision making process and asking Him to reveal to them whether or not they should marry. Seeking spiritual affirmation appears to ease their anxiety and give them peace about such decisions. The theme “Spiritual Leading in Choosing a Spouse” suggests that it is important for practicing Christians to seek God in the process of finding a spouse. Doing so gives participants spiritual and emotional peace about their decision.

Couples may experience anxiety or a sense of hopelessness during marriage. Newly wed couples may feel alone as they adjust to being married while other couples may feel alone or anxious as they deal with marital struggles. The theme “A Spiritual Experience of God Being an Active Participant in the Marriage” suggests that God is a

third person who is not only by each spouses side during struggles, but that He surrounds each of them as a married unit. Therefore, it is no longer merely a wife and husband facing the world and facing their problems, but there exists a third force. This force, God, is much more powerful than they are and He is on their side. This suggests that Christian couples may experience less anxiety and more peace about their marriages. They may have the sense of “It’s not just us in this together—the God of the universe is here to help us.” It seems that it would be a relief to know that God is willing to offer His infinite wisdom, insight, calming presence, and strength, throughout their marriage journey.

The theme “A Spiritual Understanding and Experience of love” suggests that there are spiritual guidelines as to what love is, and that Christian spouses are to follow this in their marriages. Indeed, throughout the Bible God demonstrates the greatness of His love. He then asks believers to imitate this love in their relationships with others (i.e., 1 Corinthians 13; Hosea). Perhaps nowhere else is a Christian more challenged to love another person, than in the daily and lifelong experience of loving a spouse. Although this may be difficult to do at times, Christians are given clear guidelines in Scripture as to what love is to look like. When Christians marry and vow to love their spouses, they know the greatness of the love that they are asked by God to give. God’s love requires that they go the extra mile, that they love unconditionally, and that they forgive. When they are experiencing troubles in their marriage, each is aware that God asks them to continue to love. Because of this, there is most likely stability in Christian marriages that perhaps does not exist in non-Christian marriages. For example, when two atheists marry, there are no outside spiritual guidelines that they are required to follow; one atheist’s definition of love may not be the same as his/her spouse’s definition. However, Christians

can always turn to Scripture and read exactly how God expects them both to love one another. This can bring stability, a stronger sense of security, and a joint vision of what their marriage should look like.

In a Christian marriage both participants understand that love is supposed to be unconditional and is to be given freely. This sounds like a powerful and transforming love. Perhaps Christian spouses who experience receiving love in this way are changed in ways that non-Christians are not. Some participants described (in the theme “A Spiritual Understanding and Experience of Love”) that they are able to more deeply understand God’s love for them because of how their spouse loves them. Perhaps there are other benefits of this love. Perhaps Christian spouses feel more deeply connected and closer to their spouses. Perhaps they are healed from past wounds and are positively changed by the unconditional love that they receive. Perhaps they are freed to love others more deeply, to be more trusting of others, or to have more self-confidence and self-esteem. It is possible that experiencing this altruistic love empowers them in many aspects of their lives.

The theme of “Spiritual Gratitude for Spouse” is also an important theme. It follows that when individuals are thankful for something they are more likely to value and treasure it. This would hold true in marriage as well. Participants describe being grateful and thankful for their spouses; the result of this gratefulness would most likely be a deeper sense of cherishing one’s spouse. This is a strong and powerful emotion in a marriage. If each spouse feels treasured by the other, he/she would be more inclined to remain committed to each other, and to treat each other in a loving manner.

It is important to discover that there are challenges that are unique to the Christian marriage (“Spiritual and Faith Challenges to the Marital Relationship”). The struggles that were mentioned by the co-researchers are issues that are fundamental in a Christian marriage. The issue of spiritual differences and discrepancies in a marriage brings up further questions. For example, when both Christian spouses are seeking God’s will and do not agree on how God is leading, what are they to do? How do they resolve this? In another example, when one spouse has a more mature understanding of God, how does this impact the marriage? These are valuable questions that should be studied further. In the meantime, it is useful to know that these struggles exist and that they could potentially cause great disharmony in a marriage.

Other themes (e.g., Spiritual Resources and Support that Enhance Marital Satisfaction; Shared Faith Rituals and Activities Promote Deeper Intimacy) that are mentioned in prior research are confirmed in this study and discussed by co-researchers in great depth. New details are revealed in the emergence of new themes. All themes listed in this research would be beneficial to study in depth; doing so could add valuable knowledge to researchers and counsellors.

### General Findings

The examination of these ten Christian spouses reveal that they reaped many marital benefits from allowing their faith to influence their relationships. In an overarching sense, these participants have an outside spiritual force (God) that intervenes and helps their marriages. This external force gives them shared meaning and purpose in their marriage and family, guides and directs them, and supports and strengthens them. God is a very positive and unifying presence in their marriages. It is obvious that this

external presence is very active and plays a large role in creating, sustaining, and improving these marriages. Participants are very thankful for God's presence in their marriage and cannot imagine their relationship without Him in their midst. The benefits and joys of this external force working in their marriages is one that they desire, use, and are blessed by. God's obvious and constant presence is a very positive force that enhances the marriages. Thus, Christian marriages seem to have a built-in bonus of a force that nurtures and supports their relationships. This is an experience unique to Christian marriages.

These marriages often benefited from having an external "guidebook" to turn to for advice on life values and decision-making, and for encouragement and support. The Bible helps them in their understanding of whom to marry, what marriage involves, and gives them an altruistic understanding of love. It also guides them in sexual matters, parenting, financial values, how to solve conflict, and time-management decisions. This external source seems to benefit their marriages immensely. It gives them common values and perspectives, and emotional support.

These marriages embody greater emotional closeness because spouses share beliefs that are foundational to their understanding of life and marriage. Husbands and wives agree on beliefs about marriage, God, love, sexuality, values, finances and parenting. These shared understandings deepen couples' intimacy because they agree on subject matters that are important to them. As one woman shared, no matter what the state of their relationship, they always know that they have a common faith and belief system that connects them. For all participants, these shared life values also prevent some

conflict about important life decisions and philosophies because their Christian beliefs give them common understandings of many of these subjects.

In particular, the subjects of sex, parenting, and finances (which can be major obstacles or stumbling blocks for many couples), are more easily navigated in Christian marriages because of common foundational beliefs surrounding sexual intimacy, parenting, and finances. The results suggest that Christian spouses may experience less marital stress and conflict (and thus greater marital satisfaction) because these differences are somewhat moderated.

These marriages seem to have a very low likelihood of divorce. All participants have a very strong belief that divorce is not an option. Marriage vows are made to both their spouse and to God; they do not intend to ever break this promise to God. This promise along with their Christian understandings of marriage motivates them to work out problems and to not give up on their marriages.

When they do encounter problems, they have many resources to turn to. They describe God's power and Spirit directly intervening and helping their marriages. They also use many Christian resources (i.e., marriage conference, books, Christian counsellors) when they need marital help. Praying to God and following His guidance is helpful; they also describe being able to go to other Christians for encouragement and advice about marriage. They do not tend to feel isolated, hopeless or overwhelmed by struggles. Their spiritual community supports and encourages their marital commitment to one another and helped them sustain marital satisfaction. They describe optimistic attitudes towards life and the belief that God will help sustain their marriages.

It is obvious that these marriages have a strong chance of not only surviving but of thriving. These Christian marriages appear to be lasting and stable relationships because of strong internal beliefs and a variety of external marriage support and resources.

It is very striking that each participant describes being extremely grateful and appreciative for his or her spouse. It was remarkable how thankful to God they are. This feeling of appreciation would tend to cause them to value their spouses and marriages more. This could only have positive repercussions for the marriage. Perhaps this air of gratitude helps them to feel more emotionally connected to their spouse and more committed to their marriage. Feeling this way could reduce negative patterns such as criticism and nagging and could inspire them to be less selfish and more altruistic in their actions. Feeling valued and cherished by the other could also lead to increased self-esteem and self-confidence in spouses.

This research reveals and highlights the positive benefits of Christian faith in marriage. It is evident that the external and powerful factor of God influencing a marriage has a great benefit on the marriage. Through shared faith and reading of the Bible, couples shared common life philosophies and values that bring them closer together; it also reduces some conflict. When marriage conflicts do arise, their internal beliefs about marriage and divorce in addition to external Christian support allows them to work through such times. As well, the attitude of deep gratefulness for their spouses enables them to cherish their relationship. For these ten co-researchers, practicing Christian beliefs while married leads to stronger and emotionally close relationships. These couples seem much less likely to divorce and describe a high degree of marital contentment.

These results help to reveal a deeper understanding of how God works in marriage and how spouses experience their faith having an influence on their marriages.

#### Limitations of the Study

Some limitations to this study are related to the methodology employed. In all research using phenomenological methods, data obtained relies on the accuracy of the memory of participants. As well, participants are always self-selected; this may inherently cause some sort of bias in the research findings. Those who volunteer to participate in the interviews may have different values and/or personality types. They may be more altruistic than others (e.g., wanting to help a graduate student in her research), they may be more self-reflective and self-aware, and they may be more confident and comfortable in opening up to strangers. Additionally, they may be swayed by a desire to portray a positive experience of their marriage.

A limitation unique to this research may be that all co-researcher are in seemingly stable, seemingly healthy and happy marriages at the time of the interview. Past conflicts and troubles are referred to, but no participants said that they are currently experiencing strong marital problems. Perhaps results would have been slightly different if some of the individuals had been enduring intense marital conflict or problems at the time when they shared their experiences.

As well, although individuals shared about times of conflict in their marriages, there may have been a desire to portray their marriages in a positive manner and to say the “appropriate Christian” things. My own experience in the Christian church suggests that people are often reluctant to admit that they are struggling in their marriages or to ask for help when experiencing deep marital challenges. They feel that because they are

Christians they must “have it all together” and “know all the answers.” It is possible that some of these concerns and fears infiltrated the interviews.

A final limitation of the study is that the researcher may have been biased in her interpretation; this could have compromised reliability. Although bracketing and validation of the results with the co-researchers occurred, ultimately other Christians will decide how accurately these results represent their experiences.

#### Recommendations for Further Research

As mentioned previously, each of the 13 themes that emerged from this research would be valuable to study more in depth. For example, phenomenological studies that explore only one theme at a time may result in even richer findings and understandings of themes noted in this research. As well, quantitative researchers could develop scales that attempt to measure some of these findings (i.e., length from beginning to resolution of conflict in Christian versus non-Christian marriages). Exploring any of these themes would open up new areas in Christian family research that are needed in the Christian arena today. Themes 1 (Spiritual Leading in Choosing a Spouse), 2 (A Spiritual Understanding of the Origin and Design of Marriage) and 7(Shared Spiritual Foundations Regarding Values and Life Philosophy), upon further examination could prove to very useful in pre-marital counselling sessions. Counsellors and pastors could use information as a starting point for discussions of similarities and differences in a couple as well as examining their spiritual reasons to marry (or not to marry). Themes 3 and 4 (A Spiritual Experience of God Being an Active Participant in the Marriage; A Spiritual Understanding and Experience of Love) could lead to much needed theories about Christian marriage. Although Theme 5 (A Spiritual Understanding and Experience of

Sexuality) has been mentioned in current literature, more research could lead to sexual interventions and assistance for Christians experiencing intimacy problems. Current resources for sexuality issues that do not include spirituality are lacking in relevance for Christians spouse who have unique values and understandings regarding sexuality. Therefore, this study has shown that counsellors should not only be aware of, but also be open and willing to address spirituality when discussing sexual issues with Christian married clients. Further research may involve developing tools of awareness or creating workshops (for counsellors or for couples) that deal with the topic of sexuality and spirituality.

Themes 6 (Spiritual Resources and Support that Enhance Marital Satisfaction), 9 (Shared Faith Rituals and Activities Promote Deeper Intimacy), 12 (Personal Faith Positively Affects the Marriage Relationship) and 13 (Spiritual Gratitude for Spouse), centre on what contributes positively to Christian marriages and could be used in increasing marital satisfaction, enhancing stagnant marriages, and encouraging troubled marriages.

An especially valuable area of research would be to follow up and delve more deeply into the Christian experience of resolving marital conflict. Exploration of Themes 6 (Spiritual Resources and Support that Enhance Marital Satisfaction), 8, (Shared Spiritual Applications in Finances and Parenting) 10 (Spiritual Components of Conflict Resolution), 11 (Spiritual and Faith Challenges to the Martial Relationship) and 13 (Spiritual Gratitude for Spouse) has the possibility of finding theoretical explanations, Christ-centred solutions, and resolution models to common Christian marital conflicts. For example, researchers could examine the role that gratitude can play during the midst

of an argument. Findings could be applied in creating and teaching conflict resolution models to Christian couples.

As well, the research findings indicate that Christians experience unique challenges in their marriages due to faith differences. It would be useful to learn more about these faith conflicts and to examine if there are other conflicts that are unique to Christian marriages. For example, a valuable research question would be to examine how couples have successfully dealt with a difference in faith maturity between two spouses. Working more purposefully on this topic could help to uncover a deeper understanding of this experience. Researchers could learn how common an issue this is in Christian marriages and could discover what sort of impact this experience has on the marriage. Once this has been done, counsellors with a theological background, or perhaps working in conjunction with theologians or pastors, could develop a model for dealing with unique faith conflicts. It is probable that Christian couples would benefit from this additional understanding of how their faith plays such an important role in both the struggles that they face and the tools that they have available to them in working through them. It would be extremely valuable to focus on this topic with the hopes of gaining a greater understanding of how to work through faith differences.

Another related area would involve interviewing divorced Christians (specifically, those who were practicing Christians and married to a practicing Christian at the time of their divorce). Participants in this study are adamant that there was no reason for divorce and that God helps them to resolve all their conflicts. Thus, it would be valuable to find out how the experience of divorced Christians is different. It is important to find out what leads to the dissolution of these marriages. What has been their experience of being a

Christian and being married? What help did they seek prior to divorcing? How are their experiences similar and dissimilar to those in this study? Perhaps pastors and counsellors could use insights gained from such research in pre-marital and marital counselling sessions. Insights could potentially lead to new compatibility measures for couples in hopes of preventing divorce.

It would also be valuable to study participants who have different backgrounds from those in this research. This study happened to have only Caucasian, Canadian participants. There may be differences found among Christians of other cultures, races, and nationalities. Perhaps issues (such as submission or conflict resolution) are handled in different manners; faith may be expressed in the marriage in different ways. Seeing as how Canada is a multi-cultural country, it would be helpful to focus on the unique experiences of non-Caucasian married Christians.

This research limited participants to those who have been married to only one partner. It is worthwhile to examine Christian blended families and step-families. These types of families are becoming much more common and they most likely have new or different issues that must be dealt with (i.e., parenting issues, visitation and custody issues, possible emotional issues from past marriages, step-siblings, support of the church, etc.).

Much more qualitative research needs to be done to examine Christian faith and marriages. There is a lack of literature in this area. Because literature is so sparse, it would be wise to consider more qualitative research; this methodology is excellent in examining areas that have not been researched or understood extensively. Qualitative

methods allow researchers the opportunity to hear “straight from the horses mouth” their experiences of faith and marriage.

The results from this study could also be used as a springboard for researchers to explore emerged themes in a quantitative manner, and to produce tests and measures to further examine these findings. Comparison studies between Christian marriages and atheistic marriages or other-faith marriages could reveal unique aspects to Christian relationships. Some interesting studies would be to examine how Christians versus non-Christians resolve conflict in marriage (i.e., effectiveness of methods used, amount of time before conflict ends), and how Christians versus non-Christians differ/agree in the area of expressing appreciation and gratitude for spouses.

#### Implications for Counselling

In general, reading and understanding the results of the research will enhance Christian counsellors’ understanding of how faith may be influencing the marriage of their clients (useful in both individual and marriage counselling). These findings can help Christian counsellors identify themes that may be important to explore in counselling sessions. As well, Christian counsellors who have never been married or who do not have Christian spouses will gain valuable insights from this intimate description of marriage.

Knowledge from this research is also useful for pastors. Parke (2001) acknowledges that clergy often play a crucial role in religious marriages in terms of pre-marital and marital counselling. This study provides a deeper and richer understanding of how the psychological and spiritual dynamics of Christian marriage interact, and the benefits and challenges of Christian marriages. It would be valuable for research

information to be passed on to pastors, church workers, or other Christian professionals whose work includes a counselling role.

This study is also extremely useful for non-Christian counsellors who have practicing Christians as clients. This study will enable them to gain access into the unique, personal, and intimate world of married Christians. Many themes in this study would probably be very new to non-Christian counsellors. By understanding the values, philosophy and experience of Christian marriages, they will be able to counsel in more sensitive, competent, and ethical manners. They may be able to empathize and understand their clients to a much greater extent and get a more in-depth understanding of the unique benefits and challenges to their clients. For example, they may be less likely to see separation or divorce as an option for Christian clients who are experiencing marital difficulties. In particular, ideas of sexuality, the design of marriage, and the Christian understanding of love can allow a non-Christian marriage counsellor to better understand the lived experiences and life meanings of Christian clients.

Among all counsellors, this research reveals ways to improve a troubled marriage as well as ways to improve an already satisfactory marriage. Some ideas for counsellors to work with in Christian couples' counselling include: fostering an air of gratitude and appreciation for spouse; working through sexual issues so that clients can thoroughly value and enjoy sexual intimacy; encouraging shared faith activities for spouses who are not feeling close; suggesting the use of Christian resources as additional support (as listed in Theme 6); and including spiritual aspects (such as prayer, forgiveness) for effective conflict resolution (Theme 10). Some counsellors may even be motivated to create a

Christian conflict resolution model, based on the themes and ideas discovered in this research.

This research also highlights which ideas and topics are vital to discuss with Christian who want pre-marital counselling. Each and every one of these 13 themes could be explored in sessions with clients. Themes can be used as springboards for discovering and furthering discussing areas in which couples disagree, and highlighting areas that need to be resolved before marriage. Doing so may solidify relationships bring couples closer as they realize how similar they are in foundational values and spiritual understandings. It may aid in preventing problems before they begin. However, examination of these themes may also bring about the realization that some couples are a mismatch for marriage and/or are not ready yet for the responsibilities of this committed relationship. Discussing theme one in sessions (Spiritual Leading in Choosing a Spouse) may either affirm or disaffirm their decision to marry. Again, some motivated counsellors may develop a specialized pre-marital counselling model for Christians based on some of these findings, or choose to use it in conjunction with existing materials.

In terms of general usage, this research shows the joys and benefits that come from two Christians committing their lives to Christ and to one another in marriage. It reaffirms the wisdom and truthfulness of many biblical principles (such as forgiveness, selflessness, having God as the centre of one's life, abstaining sexually before marriage, etc). It emphasizes the uniqueness of Christian marriage and how turning to God can help all situations.

## Summary

This research reveals and highlights the influences of Christian faith in marriage. It is evident that faith in God causes profound changes to occur in Christian marriages. Spouses are placed into the unique and beneficial position of having a powerful, loving, and all-knowing God direct, nurture, and support their marriages. Through shared faith and shared prayer, couples gain common life philosophies and values that bring them closer together. Sharing this common foundation about the meaning and purpose of their lives brings them closely together emotionally and intellectually. They end up sharing opinions and thoughts on vital life decisions such as parenting, sex, and finances. As a result, issues in marriage that are sometimes difficult to navigate become more easily managed.

Conflicts occur in all marriages. Differences in faith maturity and differences in how they believe God is leading, appears to be challenges that are unique to Christian spouses. In terms of conflict resolution, practicing Christians employ unique methodology in resolving their issues. They receive marital assistance through prayer, Christian friends and counsellors, and external sources such as books and attending marriage conference. They have many additional resources, including the support of their spiritual community, which encourages them to remain committed and devoted to their spouses. As such, these ten co-researchers state that would never divorce.

Co-researchers describe a lasting and unconditional spiritual love for their spouses. They reveal a way of relating to their spouses that involves selflessness and servant hood; this type of altruistic love may have transforming and healing properties for those receiving it. Christian spouses also have a deep sense of gratitude for their marriage partners, which leads them to cherish and protect their relationships.

For these ten co-researchers, their Christian faith leads to stronger and more emotionally close relationships with their spouses. Overall, these couples describe a high degree of marital contentment and satisfaction. These results help to reveal a deeper understanding of how God works in marriage and how spouses experience their faith having an influence on their marriages.

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## APPENDIX A

### Bracketing

As a married and practising Christian, I have specific values and underlying assumptions about faith and marriage. While I have tried to ensure that these biases did not influence the interpretation of the data obtained, it is prudent and helpful to let readers understand my background.

I grew up in the Christian church and have been a practicing Christian since my early teenage years. In my church home I had the opportunity to observe many married couples and grew to see them as role models of biblical and God-pleasing marriages. In the majority of cases, I saw that when both husband and wife were believers they seemed to have very strong, loving, and committed marriages. I noticed positive differences not only in their personal lives, but also in their marriages and how they raised their children. This made sense to me because I understood and had personally experienced the power of the Holy Spirit in transforming my heart and life. It was logical to me that a Christian who was inwardly changed by the gospel would have a changed understanding and attitude towards one's spouse and life circumstances that they shared.

who was inwardly changed by the gospel would have a changed understanding and attitude towards one's spouse and life circumstances that they shared.

During my teen years I decided that I wanted this kind of marriage—one in which both partners have been transformed by God's grace and in which they treat each other with an understanding and commitment to Christian marital values. I read many Christian books on dating and marriage and prayed for my future husband. I wanted to ensure that when I decided to marry a man it would be a decision that was supported by my intellect, my emotions, and my spiritual life.

Three years ago I met a wonderful Christian man, Brad; we married in August 2002. We dated for almost two years and I was thankful that God had a major influence in our relationship. Our shared faith brought us together in many ways. We worshipped at the same church and attended Bible studies and church related functions together. We shared many common life values, including being both committed to staying sexually pure until marriage. We both realized the solemnity of making a decision to marry because we both understood that marriage was a lifelong commitment; divorce would never be an option.

I feel that God's presence in each of our lives is what makes the biggest difference in our relationship (both when we were dating and now that we are married). Foundationally, we have shared faith beliefs that not only draw us together but that we can use to hold each other accountable in our actions and words. Our faith gives us life and relationship goals and desires that I see as being quite different from those of non-Christians.

Through Bible reading and prayer I seek God's wisdom and direction in my life and in our marriage. We also pray together on a daily basis. The Holy Spirit also influences how I choose to treat Brad on a daily basis. I desire to serve Brad and to continue to learn how to love him with a Christ-like, unconditional love. Brad treats me in an exceptionally loving and honouring manner; I see this as a combination result of his Christian beliefs, God's guiding, his personal desires, and his upbringing.

There are values and actions inherent to our faith that have a great impact on how we treat each other. Some of these qualities include: grace, humility, patience, gentleness, forgiveness, and acceptance of the others' flaws and weaknesses. I have seen how these actions have contributed to a strong, healthy, and vibrant relationship between us.

The fact that my husband and I are both committed Christians is absolutely foundational to our marriage. Christ has made a huge impact in our relationship and I know that this will continue in the future.

Conducting this research has been both a learning experience and an affirmation of some things that I have already experienced. I hope that research will continue to examine the unique marital experiences of committed Christians as well as study what the factors contribute to Christians deciding to divorce.

APPENDIX B

Advertisement in Church Bulletin



## AN OPPORTUNITY TO HELP

Are you...

a Christian who regularly prays, reads the Bible and  
attends worship service?  
married to a Christian?  
married for 5 years or more?

If you answered yes to all three questions, you are qualified to  
participate in research on Christian Marriages!

Jennifer Antonsen is completing her MA in Counselling  
Psychology and needs male and female volunteers to  
participate in her thesis research.

Participants will agree to a one hour interview with Jennifer in  
which they share their answer to the question "According to  
your personal experience, how has your Christian faith  
influenced your marriage and your relationship with your  
spouse?"

In thanks, all participants will be entered into a draw to win a  
\$75 restaurant gift certificate

If you are willing to participate or know of someone who is  
please  
call 604-539-2552  
email [audio@uniserve.com](mailto:audio@uniserve.com)  
or talk to her after service

**THANK YOU!**

APPENDIX C

Email Advertisements

Email to Counselling Psychology students at Trinity Western University

“Help needed–Christian & Married research participants”

Hello everyone!

I am in the process of looking for co-researchers (participants) for my qualitative thesis research and I would really appreciate your help!

My thesis will examine the experience of married Christians. During a private interview, participants will be asked to share their thoughts on the question, “According to your personal experience, how has your Christian faith had an influence on your marriage and your relationship with your spouse?” They will also be phoned at a later date to share their thoughts on the tentative research findings. Confidentiality will be maintained.

Co-researchers will need to meet the following 3 criteria:

1. Be a self-described “practicing Christian.” For the purpose of this study a “practicing Christian” will be defined as an individual who believes in the God of the Bible and who regularly participates in prayer, Bible reading and church attendance.
2. Be currently married to a Christian.
3. Be married for a minimum of five years.

As a token of appreciation, all co-researchers will be entered into a draw to win a \$75 gift certificate to a local restaurant.

I would be grateful for any help in finding participants for my research. Please pass this information on to eligible friends, family, and clients. Those who are willing to share their insights may contact me via the information provided below.

Thank you very much for your assistance! Have a great day!

Jennifer Antonsen (nee Kausy)

[audio@uniserve.com](mailto:audio@uniserve.com)

604-539-2552

Graduate Student

Trinity Western University

Email to Friends and Acquaintances

“Help needed with thesis research!”

Hello everyone!

As many of you may know, I am currently working on my thesis research in order to complete my MA in Counselling Psychology from Trinity Western University. My research is exploring the experience of married Christian individuals. I am hoping that you can help me to find people who are willing to be participants in my research!

I need to find both men and women who are willing to partake in a one-hour interview session with me. During this time, they would share with me their understanding of how their Christian faith has influenced their marriage relationship. Participants would need to meet the following 3 criteria:

- Be a self-described “practicing Christian” (for the purpose of this study a “practicing Christian” will be defined as an individual who believes in the God of the Bible and who regularly participates in prayer, Bible reading and church attendance)
- Be currently married to a Christian.
- Be married for a minimum of five years

As a token of my thanks, all participants will be entered into a draw to win a \$75 restaurant gift certificate.

If you meet these criteria, or know of others who may be willing to help me with my research, please phone (604-539-2552) or email me ([audio@uniserve.com](mailto:audio@uniserve.com)).

Thank you – I appreciate your assistance very much!

Jennifer Antonsen (nee Kausy)  
604-539-2552  
[audio@uniserve.com](mailto:audio@uniserve.com)

## APPENDIX D

### Initial Information Letter for Interested Co-researchers



Dear Interested Co-researcher,

Thank you very much for your interest in participating in my research study. I am a graduate student completing my Master of Arts in Counselling Psychology at Trinity Western University. My thesis research is examining how Christian spouses understand the influence of their Christian faith on their marriages. Because there is little research on this topic, I hope that my findings will help counsellors and psychologists to have a deeper understanding of the Christian marriage relationship.

This study asks participants to take part in a private interview with the researcher. This interview will last approximately sixty minutes and will be audio taped. During this time participants will be asked to share their thoughts on the question: *“According to your personal experience, how has your Christian faith had an influence on your marriage and your relationship with your spouse?”*

After all data has been collected, participants will be mailed a letter outlining the tentative research findings. The researcher will then contact participants via phone and ask whether the findings seem to accurately relay what they have personally experienced. This follow-up phone call will take approximately fifteen to thirty minutes.

Participants in this project will need to *meet several requirements*:

- 1.They must describe themselves as a “practicing Christian.” For the purpose of this study a “practicing Christian” will be defined as an individual who believes in the God of the Bible and who regularly participates in prayer, Bible reading and church attendance.
- 2.They must be currently married to a Christian.
- 3.They must be married for a minimum of five years.

Should you meet the requirements of this study, and decide to participate, all details of your identity will be kept confidential. Your name and any other identifying details shared during the interview will not be used in my written research or shared with anybody.

As a token of my appreciation for helping in this project, participants will be entered into a confidential draw to win a \$75 gift certificate to a local restaurant. The winner will be contacted by phone.

Thank you again for your interest in participating in my thesis research! I am excited about this research and am encouraged by your interest. I will be in touch with you as to your interest and eligibility in being a co-researcher. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at 604-539-2552 or via email at [audio@uniserve.com](mailto:audio@uniserve.com)

Jennifer Antonsen

APPENDIX E

Consent Form for Co-Researchers

## CONSENT FORM FOR CO-RESEARCHERS



**Date:** November 28, 2002

**Title of Project:** God in the Marital Triangle: The influence of Christian faith in marriage

**Researcher:** Jennifer Antonsen 604-539-2552

**Thesis Supervisor:** Dr. Chuck MacKnee (Trinity Western University)  
604- 513-2121 ext. 3110

The purpose of this research is to study how Christian faith influences marriages. To better understand this experience, you will be asked to participate in a 60 to 90 minute private interview with the researcher. The interview will be audio taped. The interview will be a time for you to share all aspects of how your faith has influenced your marriage. The interview will focus on your answer to the question “According to your personal experience, how has your Christian faith had an influence on your marriage and your relationship with your spouse?”

After all interviews have been studied, a summary of tentative findings will be mailed to you. A follow-up phone interview (15-30 minutes) will take place in order to see if you feel that the researcher has correctly understood your experience. You may use this time to clarify any aspects that may have not been properly understood by the researcher. Participants should expect to spend approximately two hours in this research project. Upon request you will be able to read the completed thesis.

All efforts will be made to protect your confidentiality. Any identifying material such as names of individuals will not be transcribed or included in the written thesis. All participants will be given pseudonyms. While the thesis is being written audiotapes and transcripts will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. Once thesis requirements for the Master’s degree have been met, all tapes will be erased. Transcripts will be saved on a password-protected disc and stored in a locked filing cabinet in the offices of the Counselling Psychology department of Trinity Western University. Should these transcripts be used again, you will be contacted via the contact information you provide.

There are no known risks of participating in this study. A benefit to participating is personal clarification of the ways that Christian faith has influenced your marriage. By participating in this research study, you will help Christian and non-Christian counsellors have a more thorough understanding of how the dynamics between faith and marriage. As a token of my appreciation, your name will be entered into a confidential draw to win a \$75 gift certificate at a restaurant.

You may withdraw at any time from the study without consequence. Should this occur your data (audio tape and transcript) will be immediately destroyed.

If you have any questions about *ethical issues* involved in this project you may contact Mrs. Candy O’Connor in the office of the Academic Vice President at 604-513-2037.

I HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AND I  
WILLINGLY CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_

DATE \_\_\_\_\_

MAILING ADDRESS (Street, City, Postal Code)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

TEL \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX F

Interview and Question Format

### Steps

1. Give information about the research project
2. Sign an informed consent form.
3. Turn on audiotape
4. Orientation Speech

“I am interested in discovering how you think your marriage is influenced by your Christian faith. Please share your experiences as honestly and openly as possibly with me. It is best if you can think out loud and tell me all the thoughts that you are having throughout our interview. Please share freely and openly, without thinking about what I may be expecting you to say. The question I’d like you to share about is:

*According to your personal experience, how has your Christian faith influenced your marriage and your relationship with your spouse?”*

5. Additional Prompts and Questioning

Are there other aspects of your marriage that your faith has influenced?

How do you think your marriage experience is different from what it would be like if you and your spouse were not Christians?

What is this experience like for you?

## APPENDIX G

### Validity Check Letter to Co-researchers



April 14, 2003

Dear Research Participant:

It has been a few months since I interviewed you for my thesis research. Thank you again for volunteering to share your experience with me of how your faith has influenced your marriage and your relationship with your spouse. Your experience has been invaluable to me in conducting this research.

I have now read and compiled all the interview transcripts and have searched for shared meaning in the experience of being a Christian spouse. From the interviews, thirteen common themes emerged (enclosed). I have written a brief summary of the meanings and themes that were common to all participants. This summary is called the "Common Story" and is also enclosed.

The second part of participating in this research involves your feedback. I ask that you would read the enclosed summary of the research findings (the "Common Story") and see how it matches with your experience. I will contact you by phone within a week and ask you to share your thoughts. The purpose of the phone call is to find out if the Common Story accurately portrays your experience of how your faith has influenced your marriage. During the phone call I will ask the following two questions:

1. "How do my descriptive results (the "Common Story") compare with your experience?"
2. "Have any aspects of your experience been omitted?"

As an expression of my gratitude for participating in this study, I will be making a draw for a \$75 restaurant gift certificate. If your name is chosen I will contact you by phone within one month.

Again, thank you very much for your assistance in my thesis research!  
May God continue to bless and guide your marriage.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Antonsen  
TWU Graduate Student in Counselling Psychology