

Introduction

The lack of proper equipping of engaged couples for marriage in America has created an epidemic both within and outside the church. The divorce rate is hovering around fifty percent for both groups. Of great concern is the perpetual cycle that is furthered through children of divorce. Any counselor will attest to the loneliness, abandonment, and dissatisfaction of children who have become victims of divorce.¹ For the counselor facing the engaged couple today, the challenge to help them lay the foundation for a happy and successful marriage is greater than ever. Among all the facets of this challenge, one that is growing in frequency is intercultural marriages. This paper will present both the challenges and opportunities faced by the intercultural couple, in the context of biblical premarital counseling.

In reality, almost every marriage is an intercultural marriage to at least some degree, or maybe the term intersubcultural would be better. Every couple comes from a unique experience even if they are from the same region, race, ethnic group, social class or religion. Lingenfelter and Mayers define culture as “the conceptual design, the definitions by which people order their lives, interpret their experience, and evaluate the behavior of others.”² Even within our culture, there is a more defined and more limited cultural heritage that is “the early

¹ J. S. Feinberg, P. D. Feinberg, and A. Huxley, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), Chap. 11.

² Sherwood Lingenfelter and Marvin Mayers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally: An incarnational model for personal relationships*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986), p. 18.

learning which the child unquestioningly accepts.”³ Culture, then, must not be confused with race, ethnic or national origin, or religion. Culture is the lens through which one sees, focuses, and filters his or her life. It may be said then that everyone has a unique culture. However, when one speaks of ‘a culture’, the following definition would be more helpful: “patterns, traits, and products considered as the expression of a particular period, class, community, or population.”⁴ So then the word ‘culture’ can mean the way one *views* the world around them or the way one *is viewed* by those around them. These are seeming opposites, yet they are intrinsically related.

For the purpose of understanding the biblical approach to counseling intercultural couples, this paper will focus on broader cultural elements rather than specific, individual, cultural components of specific cultures (the counselor would do well to study the particular cultures of anyone whom he or she is counseling). Any counselor who works with an engaged couple must address the specific defining, interpreting and evaluating mechanisms that the two members of that couple maintain. The counselor who prepares the intercultural couple must specifically address and deal with cultural orientation. It should also be added that the church should also deal with this issue.⁵ This paper will focus first on the most prevalent form of intercultural marriage, namely, interracial. For

³ Lingenfelter and Mayers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally*, p. 19

⁴ The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition Copyright © 2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Published by Houghton Mifflin Company.

⁵ Howard G. and Jeanne Hendricks, “Preparing Young People for Christian Marriage,” (1971; 2002). *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 128* (July 1971) : 256. Dallas Theological Seminary.

purposes of definition, the term interracial will be used to represent interethnic as well. Next, the focus will move toward aspects of marriage that may have particular distinctions within an intercultural marriage including authority, ethics, communication, and relationships (including friends of both sexes and familial relationships). As has been mentioned, all couples (including same-race couples) should address these distinctives; but the interracial couple must take an especially close look at these.

Interracial

Although the term 'intercultural marriage' is not commonly used in most circles, it could easily be presumed that if one were to use this term they would most likely mean interracial, and possibly interethnic. Interracial marriages were unlawful in many states in the U.S. up until the Supreme Court decision of *Loving v Virginia* in 1967⁶. Even today, marrying a person of another race (usually linked with skin color) is considered taboo by many, although acceptance has grown in recent years.⁷ However, further data indicates that when people were asked about a family member marrying someone outside of their race, they were less

⁶ "The Loving Decision: June 12, 1967," *Association of Multiethnic Americans Website*. [article on-line]; available from <http://www.ameasite.org/loving.asp>; Internet; accessed 08 August 2003.

⁷ Lynda Guydon Taylor, "A View from the Experts: Survey finds interracial relationships well accepted," *Pittsburg Post-Gazette Website*. December 22, 2002, [article on-line]; available from http://www.post-gazette.com/neighbor_washington/20021222waexpert4.asp; Internet; accessed 08 August 2003.

accepting.⁸ So what is the biblical counselor to do when the interracial couple approaches him or her with their plans for marriage?

The first question that might need to be answered is, “Does the Bible prohibit interracial marriage?” For years, misinformed Christians claimed that God *does* prohibit the marrying of two people from different races. In actuality, the Bible does not ban interracial marriage. There are several passages that outlawed interracial marriage in the Old Testament (Ex. 34:11-16; Deut. 7:3; 1 Kings 11:1-2). The key to understanding these prohibitions is not racial, but religious. The Israelites were God’s covenant people and He did not want them to forsake their distinctiveness in relation to him. His election of them was what set them apart, not their race.⁹ In fact, many Bible scholars believe that all the racial distinctives were inhabited in both Adam and Eve. These hold that in interracial marriages more variations are possible in their offspring. Thus, the preservation of the human race through Noah still allowed for a plurality of races on the earth.¹⁰ Even though there are genetic differences between the races, in Scripture we see a de-emphasis when speaking precisely about the nations (the term *ethos*, which in the Bible would be most closely associated with race).¹¹ The trouble for many who still wrestle with this apparent prohibition is a failure to

⁸ Maria P. P. Root, “The Color of Love,” *The American Prospect Online Website*. April 8, 2002, [article on-line]; available from <http://www.prospect.org/print/V13/7/root-m.html>; Internet; accessed 08 August 2003.

⁹ Feinberg, Feinberg and Huxley, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, Chap 11.

¹⁰ D. G. Lindsay, *The Genesis Flood : Continents in collision* (Dallas, TX: Christ for the Nations, 1992), Chap. 10.

¹¹ W. Evans and S. M. Coder, *The Great Doctrines of the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), Part 2.

distinguish between the Jewish people as a race and the Jewish religion. Once one recognizes that a person's "Jewish-ness" in relation to race will not save them, then they will be able to distinguish the prohibition that God gave as being directed against interreligious marriages and not interracial marriages.

Race is an important element in culture. Because of its overtly physical characteristics, race is difficult to hide from others. Therefore, as history has shown, many atrocities and bigoted acts have been committed towards people solely because of the way they look. For the interracial couple who desires to get married, the physical elements must be addressed. Both members of the couple need to understand that in varying circumstances, each will have judgments made against them based solely on their external features. When the Caucasian man brings his Japanese girlfriend to his family reunion, his grandparents who were involved in WWII will most likely make automatic judgments against this young girl. They might look at her, see she is Japanese and never want to trust or be close to her because of the attitudes they hold from years ago. This would even be true if the young woman has been adopted as an infant, raised in Georgia, and speaks with a southern drawl. Until they get to know her, her physical attributes would define *who* she is to the grandparents. The young man might never have thought when he entered the room that anyone would think strange things of him because of his skin color (especially if he was raised in a predominantly homogenous culture). He must recognize and be sensitive to his future wife's vulnerability because of her physical characteristics, loving her as his own body (Eph. 5:28).

Beyond being sensitive to the physical differences, each spouse must also be sure not to pass on ungodly resentment (possibly even racism) to their spouse or to their children. Anthony Hoekema states, “a proper appreciation of the doctrine of the image of God...should rule out all racism. God made all human beings in his image, and all of them can enlighten and enrich us.”¹² Certainly members of same-race marriage must also guard against passing on such sin, but interracial couples must be especially careful. This is due to the fact that they will certainly undergo stresses, strains, and possibly even attacks because of their differences (1 Cor. 7:28; Eph. 4:31). If nothing else there will be struggles with identity. For example, what race does the child select when filling out a government form? Usually, there are only five to six selections and none of those are mixed. The children of such marriages must be taught how to understand their identity as a human, created in the image of God. Their identity in Christ will be the most important aspect to a healthy self-image (I use this term in the most literal sense, ignoring any “baggage” that may be associate with it). If the parent does not have a proper understanding of their identity in Christ, or their children’s, then they may take on or create offenses that they will then pass on to their children. Doing so would not benefit the children but most importantly it would not honor God (Phil. 2:3; Heb. 12:15). The biblical counselor should spend extra time dealing with the issue of children when counseling the engaged interracial couple. This should include discussions of plans for children and how

¹² Anthony Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), p. 100.

to raise them, relationships with grandparents and how they might relate to biracial children, and living location in regard to its affect on the children.¹³

Thirdly, the interracial couple must prepare for the racial-cultural differences (this term is used to make the distinction between facets of cultural differences that are distinctly a result of the racial differences and all other cultural differences). Each member of the interracial couple must seek to become educated about the other member's race. There must also be an attitude of preferring the other person. Larry Mercer provides some practical, biblical steps to promoting racial harmony that should be applied to the interracial marriage:

“Numerous biblical principles can be presented to believers to help them in interpersonal relationships—principles that also can greatly enhance interracial relationships. These include consideration for others (Matt 7:12), avoiding showing partiality (James 2:1–4), being equitable in business and personal relationships (Prov 11:1), modeling Christlikeness (Matt 5:44), obeying God's command to love Him and one's neighbor (Matt 22:37, 39), and following the example of the neighborliness of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37).”¹⁴

Expectations for the other member to conform to one's own racial-cultural characteristics must be repudiated. Differences are too numerous to expound upon, but may include differences toward finances, sex, time (promptness, time management, etc.), etiquette, leadership, communication, and work ethic. These differences can of course occur in same-race marriages, but they will be more

¹³ Nancy John Alouise, “Interracial marriages and the effects on children,” *The University of Dayton School of Law Website*. Spring 1998 [article on-line]; available from <http://academic.udayton.edu/race/04needs/s98alouis.htm#Multiracial>; Internet; accessed 08 August 2003.

¹⁴ Larry A. Mercer, “A Biblical and Cultural Study of the Problem of Racism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 153* (January 1996) : 101-102. Dallas Theological Seminary.

distinct and possibly more numerous in an interracial marriage. The counselor must make a particular effort to pose questions and assign homework that will draw these differences out for the couple to clearly see. Some of these particular differences will now be investigated, keeping in mind that they pertain to all marriages, but especially toward intercultural marriages.

Authority

The ultimate issue that must be addressed is that of authority. What will be the authority in the home and what gives that authority? If the new home that is about to be built is going to honor God, it must accept and embrace the authority and sufficiency of God's Word (2 Tim. 1:13; 2:15; 3:15-17). When the couple faces difficulties making a decision, where do they turn? When tempted to react in anger at each other, how do they decide if they will or not? Will he say, she wronged me and I deserve retribution? Or will she remember, "in your anger do not sin"? The Scriptures must be what defines love, what dictates roles, what establishes parenting guidelines and so on. Once the couple understands this, then they know where to go when trouble arises. Out of these issues, quite probably the most common that will arise will be the authority in the home. If the Scriptures are given their proper respect, then the answers will be available to both the husband and the wife.¹⁵

The Scriptures are clear that the husband is to be the head of the home (Eph. 5:23). All biblical counselors will need to deal with this subject in premarital counseling, but with intercultural couples this subject may need special attention.

¹⁵ Ronald E. Hawkins, *Totally Sufficient*, ed. Howard Eyrich and Ed Hindson (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1997), 193-197.

In some cultures the wife takes on a leadership role that is unbiblical. This role may be overt or it may be covert. It may be due to a failure to understand leadership or it may be a reaction to a failure of the husband to lead. The counselor should be aware of these issues and help the intercultural couple understand that while they do not need to forsake their cultural identity, there may be elements that they have or have observed in their parents that need to be conformed to Scriptural standards.

Another aspect of authority that may need to be addressed with an intercultural couple is that of the parent to the child. Within some cultures children are allowed to express “self-authority” that is unbiblical or they may even be allowed to “run the home.” Understanding that God has commanded children to obey their parents (Eph. 6:1) and to honor them (Ex. 20:12) is essential for all future parents to accept. If the two members of the couple come from two differing backgrounds on this issue, these truths should be resolved in their relationship before the wedding ceremony.

A final aspect of authority that may require special attention is that of submission. While the wife is commanded to submit to the husband (Eph. 5:24), the husband is also commanded to show submission to the Lord Jesus Christ by loving his wife and showing her honor (Col. 3:19; 1 Pet. 3:7). Warren Wiersbe expresses the idea of the husband honoring the wife in this helpful way:

“Giving honor’ means that the husband respects his wife’s feelings, thinking, and desires. He may not agree with her ideas, but he respects them. Often God balances a marriage so that the husband needs what the wife has in her personality, and she likewise needs

his good qualities. An impulsive husband often has a patient wife, and this helps to keep him out of trouble!”¹⁶

In addition, all believers are commanded to submit to each other in fear (Eph. 5:21). This means that as Christians even men are to model submission as Christ did. Commenting on this subject Ronald Hawkins states, “It’s the Spirit’s power that enables us to overrule the flesh and live as servants and bear fruit that enhances and promotes relationships (Gal. 5:22-25)...In relationships, this fruit is the forerunner to the development of trust. Without trust, all efforts at intimacy will crumble.”¹⁷ The one who counsels the intercultural couple must ensure that each member understands their respective role by understanding the authority of Scripture in their lives and the authority that it establishes in the home.

Ethics

Another factor that may be a challenge to intercultural couples is that of ethics. Although the term “ethic” may refer to a guiding principle of good and bad, for this paper it will be used to mean a “a guiding philosophy”.¹⁸ Since the topic of the authority of Scripture has already been covered, it can be assumed that anything that is dictated by Scripture as morally wrong should stand for all Christians. What the biblical counselor should pay attention to in this realm are philosophical differences that may exist between the two cultures represented by the couple. These issues might include work, raising children, personal habits,

¹⁶ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. (Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1989) chap. 6.

¹⁷ Hawkins, *Totally Sufficient*, 202.

¹⁸ Merriam-Webster, I. (1996, c1993). *Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary*. Includes index. (10th ed.). Springfield, Mass., U.S.A.: Merriam-Webster.

cleanliness, and worship. It may be that the counselor needs only to direct the couple to the place in Scripture that deals with the moral aspects of each of these. But where the Scriptures are silent, the couple will need to discuss and work through their expectations.

The counselor might pose questions regarding birth control, whether the wife should work after children, how long the husband should give to his work (beyond normal expectations), how often they will attend church (Sundays only, Wednesdays, etc.), what is meant by honoring the Sabbath (understanding the variety of views among New Testament believers), whether the home will be open or closed (regarding what level of hospitality is expected), and expectations regarding household maintenance. Certainly all couples must deal with the above mentioned issues, but the intercultural couple must do so with specific thought to the two cultures represented. The counselor should be attuned to the differences that might exist between the two cultures in areas that might not otherwise create problems in relation to a guiding philosophy.

It should be added that for the Christian this “guiding philosophy” should be different from the world’s. This may seem obvious, but both the biblical counselor and the intercultural couple must keep in the forefront of their minds the fact that “the world is a different world for the Christian than for the non-Christian. A Christian perspective makes all the difference in how you think about a world of trees, and chairs, and money and *persons* [emphasis added].”¹⁹

Communication

¹⁹ Jay Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling: More than redemption* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), p. 42.

Of the challenges that face married couples, communication is usually near the top of the list. With intercultural couples, there may be unique challenges in regard to how they communicate and what they communicate. In some cultures, men do not reveal what they are feeling, or women are not raised to be independent or they are raised to be very independent. Whatever the situation, greater challenges in communication may occur. Again, understanding each other's culture is the key to successful interaction. The American woman who marries the Japanese man may need to be tactful when she voices her opinion, especially in front of his family. The Arab man who marries the American woman may have to overcome his own resistance to bottle up his thoughts and feelings. The American woman who has been raised to be outspoken and independent who marries the American man whose mother was quiet and shy will have to carefully guard her tongue, while the man will have to learn not to be offended by her outspokenness. For all couples, communication must be protected from contentious remarks. But the intercultural couple must be careful not to allow a disagreement turn into a personal attack (which can often become a cultural attack). Howard Eyrich writes, "One cutting remark elicits another. Communication ceases, and character defamation often develops, destroying respect and love."²⁰

The challenges that will exist for intercultural couples in the area of communication find their roots in the examples that have been set for each of them in their childhoods. If an intercultural couple is going to experience healthy

²⁰ Howard Eyrich, *Three to Get Ready* (Bemidji, MN: Focus Publishing, 1987), p. 108.

communication they must understand and exercise real diligence in developing their communication skills. Because the problem is communication, a development of healthy habits will likely not occur by default. The counselor can be especially helpful in identifying these areas and helping each member communicate more effectively, all while understanding the differences between their two cultures and the effects that their respective cultures have had on their understanding of communication.

Relationships

A final challenge that should be discussed is that of relationships. Since the role of husband and wife has already been dealt with, it is not necessary to cover that again. However, beyond marital roles, the interracial couple should consider the differences in how they have witnessed married couples relate in their own cultures. Such issues might include affection (including public affection), liberties within the marriage, and raising children. Beyond the marriage relationship, other relationships that should be considered are extended family (especially the mother-in-laws), as well as friendships (both same sex and opposite sex friendships).

Even when two Christians come together in marriage, it is not always the case that their parents are Christians. In respect to intercultural couples this may present unique challenges where the parents' homes are not submissive to God's Word. An obvious example of this would be in cultures where the mother is either overtly or subversively in control of the family. A man who has grown up in such a home, even though he may now be a Christian, may not have changed

his habits before the engagement in relation to how he responds to his mother's control. This problem can also occur with the woman. The engaged couple must effectively resolve how they will handle this unique challenge and openly communicate about it, especially in their first years of marriage. They should understand that while they can not change the cultural habits of either of their parents, their home must be established up and function according to biblical standards.

Opportunities

Marriage for the intercultural couple is not simply filled with challenges. There are also many opportunities, especially for the Christian intercultural couple. For all Christian couples there is a unique opportunity for their marriage to reflect the redeeming work of God. In Ephesians 5, Paul uses marriage as a symbolic image of redemption. The husband is to Christ as the wife is to the Church. Imbedded in this symbolic picture are distinct commands for the husband and wife. Therefore, when the Christian couple relates to one another as they have been commanded, they set forth an example of how Christ loves the Bride (by laying down His life for the Church), and how the Bride submits to Christ (through submissiveness).

The intercultural couple has the opportunity to take this testimony one step further. In the two becoming one, they picture the work that Christ has done in making Jew and Gentile one in Him (Rom. 3:22, 29; 10:12; 1 Cor. 12:13). This work of reconciliation is a spiritual work of God, but when man in obedience to God reconciles himself with another man he imitates this work of God. When two

people from different racial, ethnic or social backgrounds come together in marriage, they express a work of reconciliation between the two groups. Additionally, the children of intercultural couples express the fruit of this reconciliation. Although there are distinct challenges these children will face, Christians ought to look at them differently than the world does. These children also have the unique opportunity to reach people for Christ within both cultures that their parents represent. Through cultural diversity we can better see the full riches of the image of God.²¹

The intercultural couple is also a symbol of the redeeming work of Christ in that what is pictured in heaven in the book of Revelation is a mass of people from all tribes, tongues and nations (Rev. 7:9). In other words, Christian intercultural marriages can work because God is an intercultural God. His ultimate work in redeeming His elect and reconciling them to Himself reflects a Creator who appreciates diversity.

Conclusion

The counselor who knows, understands and submits to the authority of Scripture is sufficiently equipped to help any two Christians come together in marriage, regardless of their cultural background. Ronald Hawkins states it well when he writes, “The Scriptures arm us with sufficient information and principles to guide couples toward true marital fulfillment. This is not surprising when we realize that the founder of the institution of marriage is also the author of the Holy

²¹ Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 100.

Scriptures.”²² It could be added that He is also the Creator of all tribes, tongues and nations and therefore His Word reaches beyond all human barriers between these groups.

Counselors should not shy away from preparing intercultural couples for marriage. They should be honest regarding the challenges they will face. They would even do well to study the cultures of people they are going to counsel. But ultimately, if the two members of the couple are believers, there is great hope for a marriage that will glorify God. The counselor will then do well to not only fairly present the challenges, but enwrap each challenge with the many opportunities that the couple will have to display the work of Christ to those around them.

²² Hawkins, *Totally Sufficient*, 202.

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