PREMARRIAGE COUNSELING LEADER’S GUIDE
A City Bible Church Resource
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Introduction

Under the direction of the pastoral oversight of City Bible Church, it is a requirement for every couple desiring to be married with the blessing of this local church that they undergo a series of premarital counseling sessions. These sessions will begin with an initial discussion and interview with a CBC pastor, which is usually their Campus Pastor. Following this initial interview, the couple will then be assigned to a CBC approved counselor to complete six sessions of marriage preparation which will include instruction, interactive discussions and homework assignments. On occasion, the church may schedule a “preparing for marriage workshop” where engaged or pre-engaged couples can complete some of the required sessions in a group setting.

We make pre-marriage counseling a requirement at City Bible Church without apology. Marriage is a serious commitment. Marriages today receive less outside support than in times past. The general culture supporting marriage has eroded through changes in values, which has resulted in an emphasis on selfishness and individualism. Those, combined with changes in divorce laws and the sexual revolution, have made it much more challenging for couples to sustain a life-long marriage.

A large portion of the material used for the six marriage preparation sessions are drawn from the book Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts (SYMBIS), by Drs. Les & Leslie Parrott. Other resources that will be utilized are the two workbooks that accompany SYMBIS and Sheet Music by Dr Kevin Leman. Sheet Music is an enlightening resource that will help the couple prepare for sexual intimacy and material from this book will be referred to during the final counseling session. These materials will need to be purchased by the engaged couple.

Below is an outline of the six recommended sessions along with the accompanying resources the counselor and engaged couple will need to complete the sessions.

**SESSION OUTLINE**

**Session 1:** Expectations, Myths & True Love  
SYMBIS: Before You Begin and Ch. 1 & 2; SYMBIS Workbook: Exercises 1-5

**Session 2:** Happiness & Home Life  
SYMBIS: Ch. 3; SYMBIS Workbook: Exercises 10-14

**Session 3:** Talking, Listening & Gender Differences  
SYMBIS: Ch. 4 & 5; SYMBIS Workbook: Exercises 15-18

**Session 4:** Arguments & Decision Making  
SYMBIS: Ch. 6; SYMBIS Workbook: Exercises 21-24

**Session 5:** Finances & Budgeting -  
SYMBIS Workbook: Exercises 19-20  
Complete Budget Worksheet

**Session 6:** Spiritual & Emotional Intimacy  
SYMBIS: Ch. 7; SYMBIS Workbook: Exercises 6-9; Sheet Music: Ch. 1-4 & 8-9 ONLY
Required Materials

CBC PROVIDED MATERIALS:

1. City Bible Church Engagement Readiness Evaluation Survey
2. City Bible Church Counseling Agreement
3. City Bible Church Marriage Preparation Leaders Guidebook
4. Budget Worksheet and excel file

The CBC Marriage Preparation Leaders Guidebook contain a discussion outline for each of the six pre-marriage counseling sessions. The notes feature a summary review of the reading assignments from the *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts* book (SYMBIS); suggested discussion questions, along with the reading and workbook assignments to be completed by the engaged couple prior to the next session.

The notes for each session also may include insights from the Bible and occasionally some additional material that is not thoroughly covered in the SYMBIS materials. These areas will be clearly marked in your notes.

MATERIALS TO BE PURCHASED:

2. *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts Workbook for Men* by Les & Leslie Parrot
3. *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts Workbook for Women* by Les & Leslie Parrot
4. Sheet Music by Dr Kevin Leman

OPTIONAL RESOURCE

Couples Checkup Engaged: This is an online assessment which measures 20 different aspects of a couple’s relationship. The Couple Checkup is resource of the PREPARE/ENRICH Program and is based on over 25 years of research.

This resource is available online at www.couplecheckup.com. The cost is nominal and covers both the partners. When arriving at the Couples Checkup Landing Page, the couple would choose the Couples Checkup Engaged option. The instructions are quite clear and payment is made online. The assessments are taken individually and can be done at separate times and at separate locations. Most people take about 15 to 20 minutes to complete the assessment.

Upon completion, the couple can have a copy of the report emailed directly to their pre-marriage counselor. There is a sample report included in the Additional Resources section at the back of this guide book.
Initial CBC Pastor Meeting with Couple

No doubt by the time a CBC pastors meets with a couple preparing for marriage, a lot has already happened. The question has been “popped” followed by festive engagement party, relatives and friends have been notified. There has probably even been a desired date set for the big event.

But just because the wedding day train has already left the station, this does not automatically guarantee that this is a match made in heaven. And if there are any reasons to pause about uniting these two in matrimony, this meeting and evaluation may be the last opportunity to seriously inquire, “are you sure about this?”

That is why it is critical as a pastor to be prepared spiritually and dutifully for an initial interview with the prospective couple.

**SCHEDULING AN INITIAL INTERVIEW**

Many couples throughout our church understand that pre-marriage counseling is encouraged and even required. Others find out when they call the church office to place a wedding date on the church calendar. Either way, the process officially begins with a call to a CBC pastor, usually their Campus Pastor.

When a CBC pastor first receives a call from a couple wanting to marry, a time should be set for an initial interview. Basic contact information should be exchanged, as well as an Engagement Readiness Evaluation Survey be sent to each partner to be completed prior to the initial meeting and a Counseling Agreement form to review.

**ENGAGEMENT READINESS EVALUATION SURVEY (SEE APPENDIX A, PAGE 53)**

The Engagement Readiness Evaluation Survey is a very helpful resource in evaluating a couple’s readiness for marriage. This survey has evolved over a number of years and is designed to help church leaders, and the couples themselves, honestly evaluate how ready they are to proceed from courtship to engagement to marriage.

This survey is to be completed by both the boyfriend and the girlfriend separately, and then returned to the CBC pastor prior to their initial session. This gives the pastor a chance to review the survey and look for potential problem areas or “red flags.”

Here are a few areas to pay special attention to:

- Prior marriage and divorce
- Children and custody issues
- Sexual history and moral purity
- Financial debt
- Spiritual compatibility
- Character or emotional concerns
As the CBC pastors reviews this survey with the couple during this initial session, there should be some discussion regarding how the couple’s parents, family, spiritual oversight and long-term friends feel about their relationship and impending marriage.

A copy of the Engagement Readiness Evaluation Survey should be kept in the couple’s file and passed on to the person or couple who will be leading the remaining pre-marriage counseling sessions. However, it can be instructive to provide a copy of each completed survey back to the couple.

**COUNSELING AGREEMENT (SEE APPENDIX B, PAGE 67)**

One of the very first steps that should be taken during this initial meeting with the engaged couple is to have them sign the CBC Counseling Agreement. A copy of this agreement should have been sent to the couple prior to this meeting. This agreement will help the couple better understand the scope and qualifications of the counseling relationship. This form also satisfies some legal and insurance requirements on behalf of the church.

The form they sign should include the name of the CBC pastor and spouse, and any other couples that will be participating in future counseling sessions. It is not uncommon for a CBC Pastor to conduct this initial interview and then have a Lay Pastor, Small Group Leader or other qualified CBC leader conduct the future sessions. If more than one couple will be participating in future sessions, include their names on this form as well.

By utilizing this form, the Pastor is provided an opportunity to inform the couple that the pre-marriage counseling is based upon the teaching and life principles contained in the Bible. It also gives the Pastor a chance to introduce and explain the qualifications of whoever will be leading any future sessions.

**MORAL PURITY**

In many sectors of today’s society, sex is a routine part of the dating relationship. A pastor should not assume that just because a couple is deeply committed to their faith that they aren’t sexually involved.

There are a variety of reasons that God forbids sex outside of marriage. And if the couple has been negligent in this area, it can create a fissure in the foundation of their future life together. If they have been sexually involved, the Pastor should lead them through a proper process of repentance and healing. In addition, the couple must commit to sexual purity until their wedding day or we cannot proceed with the counseling relationship. Whomever will be completing the remaining sessions should continue to encourage and hold the couple accountable in this area.

If a couple has been faithful in this area, commend them. But also caution them that temptations may arise and to remain watchful and diligent.
Four Character Qualifications of a Healthy Spouse

In days gone by, it might have been common for mom and dad to sit down with their adolescent children and begin to explain to them essential qualities to look for in a future spouse. But you can’t assume that most young people now have had that kind of input.

For most couples, sexual chemistry is one of the strong driving forces leading them to marriage. This is normal and healthy. However, sometimes the strong emotions that accompany sexual chemistry can blind a person from seeing critical flaws in their future mate’s character.

Below are four character qualities that are common to most enduring marriages. It can be healthy to lead a discussion that allows each person to express their confidence or concerns in the following areas of their future mate’s life:

1. **Faithfulness**
   - The bible says that the person who is faithful in small things will be faithful in large things. In a marriage, faithfulness is the cornerstone of the relationship. When thinking of trust and honesty, how does your fiancé score? Is he or she always truthful to you and others? Do you feel he or she may have secret areas they keep hidden from you? Do they occasionally say they went one place, but you later discover they were somewhere else? A marriage is built most fundamentally on trust. If there are areas where this trust has been compromised, it is critical to address them before you say “I do,” not after.

2. **Work Ethic**
   - There are many factors that contribute to a healthy marriage, but one area that affects marriage 24 hours-a-day, 365 days a year, is money. How would you rate your future spouse regarding their attitude toward employment, diligence and being financially responsible?

3. **Spiritual Compatibility**
   - Most Christians know the Bible forbids a Christian from marrying a non-Christian. But spiritual compatibility goes beyond a salvation experience. It’s about being on the same page regarding spiritual goals and expectations. This is particularly important when counseling a couple from different churches and different church cultures.
   - For example, the Bible would bless the marriage of a Baptist and a CBC member, but over time, the CBC spouse might long for more expressive worship if they end up attending a Baptist church. There should also be some discussion if one member is Spirit-filled and the other is not, etc.

4. **Sense of Humor**
   - Everyone’s life and marriage will be visited with surprises, disappointments and crisis. How do you feel your future spouse handles unexpected and negative circumstances? Does he or she tend to blame others, become discouraged, despondent or enraged ... or do they have the ability to smile and look for positive solutions?
Parting Instructions

• **Schedule the First Session**
  
  Give the couple the name and phone number of the counselor you’ve selected to work through the remaining counseling sessions. Instruct them to call him or her and schedule the first appointment.

• **SYMBIS Workbook Exercises**
  
  Instruct the couple to purchase the following materials. These should be purchased right away, because some assignments will need to be completed prior to their first session.

**MATERIALS TO BE PURCHASED:**

2. Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts Workbook for Men by Les & Leslie Parrot
3. Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts Workbook for Women by Les & Leslie Parrot
4. Sheet Music by Dr Kevin Leman

Prior to most sessions, the couple will be required to do some reading from the book Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts (SYMBIS). If the couple purchased only one copy of this book, they will need to share the book back and forth or read the chapters together. There will also be exercises from the workbooks to be completed between sessions.

These workbook exercises are designed to be completed individually, then discussed as a couple. The couple will be assigned a set of lessons at the end of each session to help prepare for the material that will be covered in the next session. The couple should be informed that often there is little time devoted to discussing the workbook assignments. So if something of concern or particular interest comes up as a result of a workbook exercise, the couple should take the initiative to bring it up during the session.

The set of exercises that are assigned for each session usually takes between 45 to 90 minutes to complete.

**ASSIGNMENTS TO BE COMPLETED PRIOR TO SESSION 1**

- SYMBIS Reading Assignment: Before You Begin and Ch. 1 & 2
- SYMBIS Workbook: Exercises 1-5
How to Use this Guide

Conventions for Use
This Pre-Marriage Counseling Leader’s Guide contains six sessions of notes and discussion topics. In most instances, there is more material provided than can be adequately covered during a 90 minute counseling session. These sessions are not intended to be lectures, but rather dialogues, where the session leader engages the couple in thoughtful conversation about important aspects of marriage and married life.

We recommend that as a session leader, you review the material ahead of time and determine which portions will receive the greater focus during each session. To assist, each page of your notebook has wide margins for you to add your own illustrations or help organize thoughts. Each of these six sessions will contain most or all of the following components.

Session Headline and Introduction
The welcome section is found at the beginning of each session. It includes some basic reminders for the leader and provides a two or three sentence overview to introduce the topics to be covered.

SYMBIS Reading Review
Prior to each session, the engaged couple will be given a reading assignment to be completed before the session begins. We have summarized the highlights of these reading assignments in your session notes. If the couple has been diligent to complete their reading homework, these portions of the notes can be covered more quickly, with most of the time given to discussion and feedback.

The Bible and Marriage
We have gone to lengths to give the Bible prominence throughout these notes. Even when summarizing the materials covered in the assigned reading homework, scriptural support has been added. But each session also includes an important marriage principle drawn directly from the scriptures. These sections are entitled “The Bible and Marriage”. It is strongly recommended that these sections of each session be given prominent attention.

Extra Content
In many sections, we’ve provided additional material that we feel is vital to marital success but not strongly covered in the reading or workbook assignments. These are very helpful topics and we advise that you organize your session to properly address this material.

Discussion Opportunities
Throughout each session we have placed suggested questions to provoke thought and stimulate feedback from the couple you are counseling. It is this kind of feedback that will help you as a leader ascertain whether the couple are grasping and comprehending the material being covered.

Parting Instructions
This is a basic guide to help the session leader end the session and assign the couple their reading and workbook exercises which are to be completed before the beginning of the next session.
SESSION 1

Myths, Expectations & True Love

WELCOME

If this is your first time meeting this couple, take a few minutes to get acquainted. Ask how they met and maybe share a couple things about your marriage, like how you met, a funny experience, etc.

Remember, this couple has already met with a CBC Pastor. You can assume that there are no areas of great concern with this couple, or else the District Pastor would have made you aware of the fact.

- Purity Check
  One of the critical aspects of building a strong foundation for marriage is entering it with a commitment to moral purity that should endure prior to and throughout their marriage. At the beginning of each session, we recommend asking if the couple is maintaining their commitment to remain pure.

- Reading & Workbook Assignments
  After meeting with their Pastor, they were asked to read SYMBIS sections Before You Begin plus Ch. 1 & 2 along with the Workbook exercises 1-5. Ask if they completed these assignments and if there is anything they would like to discuss.

- Introduction
  This session will de-mystify marriage a bit by addressing what a marriage is and what it isn’t. You’ll talk about expectations in marriage and talk about the bible’s view of love and how it can last a lifetime.

Marriage & the Bible

WHAT IS MARRIAGE? (Matt 19:4-6)

Since Marriage is God’s invention, we should begin by taking a look at what the Bible says about marriage. The concept of marriage began with the creation of Eve in Genesis 2:23-24. Let’s read a comment made by Jesus in Matthew 19:4 referring to the first couple. He said:

“Haven’t you read the Scriptures?” Jesus replied. “They record that from the beginning ‘God made them male and female. And he said, ‘This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.’ Since they are no longer two but one, let no one split apart what God has joined together.”
The Essence of marriage is not a feeling at all, it’s a commitment. The commitment that for as long as you both shall live, the two of you will live united as one.

The truth is, in Adam’s case, he was “married” to Eve before he actually met her. This was the ultimate example of an “arranged marriage.” But it’s pretty clear, that God intended it to last a lifetime. Here’s a definition of marriage that is consistent with Jesus’ statement:

Marriage is a permanent, exclusive and public legal commitment to share your lives together in every part.

**QUESTION:**
Is that the kind of commitment you are prepared to make to one another?

**SYMBIS Reading Review**

**FACING THE MYTHS OF MARRIAGE**

(Taken from SYMBIS Ch. 1 & 2 and SYMBIS Workbook Exercises 1-5)

Now that we’ve talked briefly about what a marriage is, let’s talk about what a marriage isn’t. The following discussion is based upon the chapters you read in the Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts book.

No rational couple today buys into the “happily ever after” notion of marriage. We’ve all seen too many marriages that end in something far short of bliss. We understand there is hard work involved, but there are some basic misconceptions that can throw your marriage deeply off-balance if they are not addressed in a realistic manner. Here are four important “myths” we will discuss in this session:

1. We expect exactly the same things from our marriage.
2. Everything good in our relationship will get better as a result of marriage.
3. Everything bad in my life will disappear as a result of marriage.
4. My spouse will make me whole.

**Myth 1: We expect exactly the same things from our marriage.**

Each individual’s expectations concerning their future marriage are developed through a lifetime of observations, experiences, contemplations and personality qualities. Unless a couple spends time talking in advance of marriage about those expectations, it can come as an unpleasant surprise to discover that your future mate’s expectations -- which have developed through the same lengthy process -- are significantly different from yours. For example:

Spouse 1: I expected our marriage to provide stability, predictability, and hospitality, active in church, home & garden.
Spouse 2: I expected our marriage to be spontaneous and full of travel. Our home is a refuge ... not a routine. I thought we’d eat out, buy a Harley and go, go, go.

As different as these two approaches to family life are, each partner may assume their spouse understands their approach and is in agreement. This might not be true. As a rule, most non-compatible expectations fall into two major categories:

1. Unspoken Rules   2. Unconscious Roles

1. **Unspoken Rules**

All of us have a set of rules that order our lives. Some are good, some are bad and some are just preferences. Problems often arise when our spouse breaks one of these unspoken, but important rules. Here are some examples:

- Don’t interrupt me when I’m working.
- Birthdays are a big deal.
- Downplay your successes.
- Don’t work too long or too hard.
- Never raise your voice.
- Always be on time.
- Pay the bills on the day they arrive.
- Only use your credit card in an emergency.
- Never buy a lotto ticket.
- Don’t buy expensive gifts.
- Clean the kitchen before you go to bed.
- Always spend the holidays with family.

2. **Unconscious Roles**

Another set of rules that often go assumed, but not discussed have to do with what role a husband should assume and what role a wife should assume.

**DISCUSSION OPPORTUNITY**

*Ask each what are some areas of married life they feel your future husband should responsible for and a wife should be responsible for?*

**Myth 2: Everything good in our relationship will get better.**

Every couple enters marriage with the healthy expectation that their life is going to be better. That’s why people get married. In real life however, some things may not improve, and others may even get worse before they get better. Here are three typical reasons things may change:

1. The romantic feelings leading up to marriage camouflaged some of the obvious short-comings of our spouse.
2. You married a human being. He or she had blemishes before you married that become more obvious as a full-time roommate.

3. Marriage has its inconveniences. These include added responsibility, caring for children, schedule demands, more financial pressure, etc.

Here’s the good news about all this; often the relational challenges that you face in life lead to some positive outcomes. Temporary disenchantment can help replace fading romantic passion with deep intimacy.

Consider this: When someone who thinks you are “wonderful in every way” loves you ... it doesn’t mean as much for the simple reason, you know you are not “wonderful” in every way. However, when your spouse loves you, even though she or he has knows your shortcomings ... that’s special love. And it builds intimacy. It is much like how tempering steel makes the steel much stronger.

**Myth 3: Everything bad in my life will disappear.**

Most complaints about marriage arise not because it is worse than the prior living arrangement, but rather because it is not incomparably better. Happiness is an individual state of being. When an unhappy person marries, they don’t magically transform. They are the same person, they just happen to be married. The love and companionship of marriage can help us deal with and heal from some past hurts and become happier people. But happiness is an internal issue and is most helped from a meaningful relationship with God, not our spouse.

**Myth 4: My spouse will make me whole.**

It is a fact that a successful marriage will make us better, more complete people. That’s because we mature through the responsibility, flexibility, sacrifice, forgiveness and challenges required to develop a successful marriage.

But if we enter marriage believing we are incomplete and that God has just one perfect person out there to complete you, you’ll be disappointed. A healthy marriage is built upon “mutual interdependency”. Your spouse is not designed to complete you. However your spouse is a vital part of God’s plan for your personal growth as your are for your spouse. Plus, the benefits of marriage increase as you learn to rely on each other’s strengths, love and support.

**Discussion Opportunity**

Name a couple of areas that are part of your life as a single person that you might have to give up as you enter married life.
Love That Lasts a Lifetime

THE ANATOMY OF LOVE

While love comes in many shapes and forms and definitions, most experts who have studied marital love agree that to be lasting, marital love needs to consist of three essential elements: Passion, Intimacy and Commitment. Think of it like a triangle with three equal sides. Let’s take a look at each leg of our triangle for a minute.

PASSION (biological love)

Passion is the biological side of our triangle. It’s the part we associate with goose bumps, a racing heart and hormones. It’s also the part of love reserved exclusively for marriage. One might think that all forms of love have passion, say the passion seen in the love a parent has for his or her child. But that kind of natural emotional attachment is really an expression of commitment and intimacy. Passionate love is rooted in sexual attraction and is one of the things that makes the marriage relationship unique from all others.

INTIMACY (emotional love)

Intimacy is the emotional side of love that thrives in knowing and being known. Intimacy is expressed with terms like transparency, closeness, acceptance, sharing and longing. True intimacy requires emotional risks which is the reason this aspect of love is not easy achieved in common relationships. But marriage is the ideal framework for deep, mutual and satisfying intimacy.

COMMITMENT (cognitive love)

Commitment is the willful side of love. Commitment promises to be there until “death to you part.” It’s described with terms like faithfulness, unshakable, security and loyalty. It’s the decision side of love. It is what allows someone to say “I will love you, forever.”

Marriage & the Bible

THE EXAMPLE OF CHRIST’S LOVE FOR THE CHURCH (Eph 5:25)

The Book of Ephesians, chapter 5 provides one of the longest, clearest biblical insights into marriage. When referring to husbands in verse 25, the passage says:

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ...”
Parting Instructions

- Schedule Your Next Session

ASSIGNMENTS TO BE COMPLETED PRIOR TO SESSION 2

- SYMBIS Reading Assignment: Chapter 3
- SYMBIS Workbook: Exercises 10-14
  Remind the couple that the exercises will all be completed by the end of their sixth counseling session, but that they aren’t necessarily done according to the order in their workbook.

- Close in prayer