

## Conflict and Healthy Relationships

© Gary Sweeten  
Sweeten Life Systems  
P.O. Box 498455  
Cincinnati, Ohio 45249  
gsweeten@cinci.rr.com

Conflict and broken relationships are some of the most bedeviling issues that face pastors and Christian leaders. For many years I operated like a bull in a china shop and told people exactly what I thought. I fully expected them to agree with me and do what I told them was wise. How could I have been so wrong? It took my Post Doctoral work in human relationships along with a dissertation on scripture and relationships to show me how wrong I was.

I learned how differently people see the same events. It is still a shock that my wife of 45 years does not really understand what I am saying. I am so clear that it amazes me when she misunderstands. Then I remember the elephant.

### **It was six men of Indostan**

To learning much inclined,

Who went to see the Elephant  
(Though all of them were blind),  
That each by observation  
Might satisfy his mind

The First approached the Elephant,  
And happening to fall  
Against his broad and sturdy side,  
At once began to bawl:  
"God bless me! but the Elephant  
Is very like a wall!"

The Second, feeling of the tusk,  
Cried, "Ho! what have we here  
So very round and smooth and sharp?  
To me 'tis mighty clear  
This wonder of an Elephant  
Is very like a spear!"

The Third approached the animal,

And happening to take  
    The squirming trunk within his hands,  
Thus boldly up and spake:  
    "I see," quoth he, "the Elephant  
Is very like a snake!"

    The Fourth reached out an eager hand,  
And felt about the knee.  
    "What most this wondrous beast is like  
Is mighty plain," quoth he;  
    "'Tis clear enough the Elephant  
Is very like a tree!"

    The Fifth, who chanced to touch the ear,  
Said: "E'en the blindest man  
    Can tell what this resembles most;  
Deny the fact who can  
    This marvel of an Elephant  
Is very like a fan!"

    The Sixth no sooner had begun  
About the beast to grope,  
    Than, seizing on the swinging tail  
That fell within his scope,  
    "I see," quoth he, "the Elephant  
Is very like a rope!"

    And so these men of Indostan  
Disputed loud and long,  
    Each in his own opinion  
Exceeding stiff and strong,  
    Though each was partly in the right,  
And all were in the wrong!

Moral: So oft in theologic wars,

The disputants, I ween,  
    Rail on in utter ignorance  
Of what each other mean,  
    And prate about an Elephant  
Not one of them has seen!

John Godfrey Saxe (1816-1887) based on a fable that was told in India

## Research about communication

Not only in theology but also in family life do we find irritating and destructive misunderstandings? Dr. John Gottman is one of the most important and influential researchers on couples healthy patterns of communication. His unique approach reveals principles and process for enhancing couple and family health that can be easily applied to the church and business. Gottman watches the mental, emotional and physiological reactions of the couple on a computer screen as they relate to each other while discussing a family situation such as planning a vacation. By hooking couples up to brain wave monitors, he has been able to track the positive and negative aspects of their relationship.

His insights are consistent with the biblical record and they reveal the destructive habits that couples have practiced since Adam and Eve. Successful marriages come in different packages. However, despite individual differences almost all successful marriages have similar characteristics and destructive marriages have identical markers. We will focus on those principles and integrate them with the biblical principles as outlined by Jesus.

Conflict can either strengthen or destroy a marriage. The way couples handle differences and the resultant conflict is the most significant difference between being successful or unsuccessful. Those who handle differences appropriately are able to make it through life with success. They will not divorce or suffer other traumatizing problems. If, however, they cannot deal effectively with the differences which plague every couple, they will very likely separate and divorce.

Couples come to a critical path in the road of marital togetherness. If they travel along the positive path the marriage will grow. If not, it will dissolve. The fork in the road is: *attack or attend*. If a mate personally *attacks* the other, the marriage is in real danger. If they find a way to *attend to each other* the marriage will grow.

Gottman's research looks at the changes in a mate's heart rate, breathing and other physiological manifestations of anxiety during a conversation. His insights come from actual changes in the physiology of mates rather than self-reports or clinical observations. As a result it is very accurate in predicting present and future problems. Gottman and his colleagues have gathered data about thousands of marriages and correlated it with marital satisfaction or destruction. They can tell when a couple is in trouble.

## The Cycle of Conflict Intensity

Level of Interpersonal Interaction	Resulting Personal State
1. Contented: At peace with others	1. Relaxed. Thinking and feeling calm Male heart rate: 72 Female: 80
<i>You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment. But I tell you that</i>	<i>Jesus brings a new teaching about caring in addition to physical relationships. This is critically important in family life.</i>
2. Complaint: A specific behavioral statement. "I" statements (I want, I think, I don't like. Some anger	2. Slight anxiety & fear. Increased heart rate-BPM & breathing muscles tense. Minor Fight/Flight
<i>...anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. (Attack or Attend?)</i>	<i>Be careful about anger, bitterness and rage. It is not always a sin but it must be handled carefully. Judge ourselves or we shall be judged</i>
3. Criticism: A vague blaming. "You" statements. Focus on person not behavior. A flaw in person. Global statements. Somewhat attacking.	3. Raised anxiety, fear, blood pressure; increased BPM& breathing; muscles tighten, eyes dilate, reduced digestion, elevated blood sugar, etc. Increase in Flight/Fight
<i>Anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca', is answerable to the Sanhedrin.</i>	<i>Raca is calling a brother or sister "stupid" or a failure. (*Note Bitter Root below)</i>
4. Contempt: Personal insult, shame mocking attacks on the character sense of self, and identity. Opposite of admiration, no respect.	4. High anxiety and stress. Feel heart beat. Shallow breathing fight/flight response hyper vigilant, brain freezes Reactive
<i>One who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the hell fire. Mt 5:21-22</i>	<i>Character attacks cause severe emotional wounds.</i>
5. Consuming defenses: Immediately reject all communication. All-out Attack	5. Severe emotional & physical anxiety. <u>Can't think</u> . Feelings rule. Fight/Flight. Shake and Tremble
6. Crushing physical response. Acts out by withdrawal or aggressively pursuing the other. Cycle of Mis-communication/misunderstanding.	6. Emotional flooding - A chronic state of hyper vigilance and hypersensitive self-talk along with emotional pain, reactivity, bitterness, mental freezing, rage, etc.
7. Complete Isolation: withdrawal. a. Problems impossible to solve b. Talking is useless c. Hopeless d. Overwhelmed	7. Too painful to interact with rational discourse. Filled with constant thoughts of attack and condemnation. Must either stay away from the person or fight them with bitterness. Divorce, church splits, etc

© Rev. Gary Sweeten, Ed. D., adapted from John Gottman, Ph.D.

I adapted the Gottman information into a simple, seven-point scale, which can be used to assess the level of a couple's marital distress and danger. The scale is useful for teaching couples how to assess their level of resiliency. It also offers suggestions for taking appropriate action at each stage. Gottman's insights can be used to prepare couples to **avoid the *attack marriage*** and **emphasize *attending skills***.

Attacking comes from people who are REACTIVE to others, especially those whom they love. Family members are usually more Reactive to others in the family because they mean so much to each other. If a drunken stranger said nasty things to me I would overlook it. However, if a mean or uncaring remark comes from my spouse or child I will normally be more upset.

Jesus mentioned that when we are anxious and angry we are in danger of being judged or causing damage to our relationships. In the Cycle of Conflict I have correlated the teachings of Jesus with Gottman's research.

When a couple, business partnership or church fellowship cannot resolve differences without anger, name calling and character attacks disasters occur. Why are divorces so high among conservative Christians? Is it our faith? No, it is our tongue that kills because we have no healthy way of releasing anger

By using scales to quantify more exactly what we are thinking about we can get a better idea about the impact of words. Instead of simply saying the elephant is big we need to describe exactly how big it is. Instead of saying I am disappointed in my mate's failure or my child's problems I can use a scale to better describe how much of a problem I detect.

The Holy Spirit inspired scripture is full words that to show various levels of intensity about an issue. For example, the same English word anger is used for several different Greek words, thus miscommunicating the intent of God to show differences in levels of feeling and acting intensity. I prefer to use a scale to help people make similar differentiations.

Reactivity can take two forms. We React to Rescuing and try to protect others or React to Rejection. Both arise from inner anxiety and a lack of peace. When we are "Too close" to another person we give them a lot of influence or even control over our emotional state. This can lead to our getting deeply hurt

We can judge our level of reactivity by using a scale to rate how much anxiety, anger, hurt or sympathy we experience at different times. President Bill Clinton is normally a very calm looking man. However, when anyone

challenges him about a failure or some “sore point” in his political record he REACTS with great fervor. If Zero means “Perfect Peace” and Ten indicates “High Anxiety/ Anger” Mr. Clinton was seen as about a Nine when Chris Wallace asked him about his failure to catch Ben Ladin.

Perfect Peace-----Medium -----High Anxiety

0----1----2----3----4----5----6----7----8----9----10

When we are at peace we can make decisions that are wise, clear and filled with love and truth. In fact, the list of Spiritual Fruit found in Galatians 5 lays out beautifully the inner life of a mature believer. Love, joy, peace, patience and kindness are said to be the outgrowth of the Spirit’s presence within us. This mirrors the words of Jesus in John 14 and 15 about having peace after he left the earth.

Death and life are in the tongue

Almost everyone has emotional wounds suffered from the tongue of a family member. *The tongue is a restless evil setting the cycle of nature on fire.* Our “cycle of nature” can be easily set on fire and result in a divorce or parent-child alienation.

*Death and life are in the power of the tongue. Proverbs 18:21*

The Cycle is useful in understanding and handling conflicts that occur in every close relationship. The data about stress, anxiety, blood pressure and heart rates are applicable to everyone. Church conflicts can produce the same cycle of anger, resentment and revenge. Church groups are extended families with spiritual connections and have emotional and physical ramifications. When one is suffering from stress at work or church it affects them at home.

### **Conflicts are Inevitable but Break-ups are Optional**

Successful relationships only happen when people learn how to resolve Conflicts without chronically moving beyond healthy Complaints. Complaints actually keep a relationship clean and growing. However, when our frustration and pain leads us to Criticism or Contempt there is danger of a permanent break in the relationship.

I presented these materials at a recent conference. Before the talk, I received a note from a woman whose husband had divorced her for another person. She asked

*How do I deal with such an evil man now that we are divorced? Should I allow him to see our children? He is really a bad person and I think his presence will damage the children.*

After my teaching she wrote another note.

*I now know why my husband wanted to be with someone else. I never gave him a chance to tell his side of things and I attacked him about a lot of issues. Thanks for telling me this information. I am going to ask him for forgiveness and tell him that he can see the children.*

Let me add that this could have been a man. Criticism and Contempt are not limited to females. Many persons see themselves as the innocent parties in a divorce or serious family conflict. If they never commit adultery or other gross sins they perceive themselves to be innocent. However, the sins of the mouth can be as damaging to intimate relationships as sex. "Death and life are in the tongue."

### **How Develop Healthy Complaints**

We need to learn how to use I Statements to share our concerns. When we make Complaining comments with the term you we should not be surprised if our mate or friend gets defensive. It seems that our brains are hard wired to react to anything that seems like an attack. On the other hand, an I Statement can lower defenses because the Complainant is taking responsibility for his/her own ideas and feelings.

Complaints can be very healthy: We need to learn how to state our wants, needs and desires directly so the people around us can understand exactly what we are saying. A good Complaint states openly what the person wants. For example: "I want to eat at home tonight. I am tired of eating out" or "I want to eat at Bob Evans tonight." They have a special pie that I really like.

This kind of a direct statement is easily understood and easily responded to by our family. "O.K. we can go to Bob Evans for the potpie but I want to eat at Penara next week." Such statements may cause us to become a bit nervous about being selfish but clear statements are much easier to deal with than

hints that require us to read minds or a passive-aggressive response that erupts into a fight later.

Example: Verbal comment: "Of course we can eat at the greasy spoon dear."  
Internal self-talk: "That rat never does what I want. He always gets his way."

The second option seems humble but nearly always ends up in a fight later. The internal self-talk is filled with Criticism and Contempt that will erupt before long.

Example: "I do not like the way we are interacting. We do not spend enough time together, especially on fun things."

Unhealthy Criticism uses "You Statements" to attack **behaviors**

Example: "You never come home and spend time with me."

Unhealthy Contempt uses "You Statements" to attack **character**

Example: "You don't care anything about being a husband/wife and never fulfill your commitment to the kids and me."

Learning to resolve interpersonal differences makes marriage and family life fun, interesting and fulfilling. By using "I Statements" we take responsibility for our own thoughts and feelings.

By using Criticism we **blame** others

By using Contempt we **shame** others

Here is the goal: Try to remove all **B.S.** (Blame and Shame) from your speech. Stop accusing others. Even the most peaceful person is worn down by B. S. so be careful what you say for "Death and life are in the power of the tongue."

Remember, all are responsible for contributing to the problems in a family. No one person is to blame for the patterns of interaction. It is always best for all members must accept our part of the responsibility.

### **Accept Personal Responsibility**

Even when we encounter Blame and Shame we can help ourselves by "Taking every thought captive to Christ." Feelings are not a direct result of another's behavior. It is more helpful to think of my feelings as the result of my own perceptions of another persons' behavior. Even my wife's personal attacks can be moderated by the way I choose to perceive them. When she is

angry and attacks me with Criticism or Contempt, I can decide to renew my mind and think: "Karen is having a bad day so I will need to be patient until she feels better."

If Karen comes home from work and fails to speak to me I could respond with anxiety, hurt and some anger or with empathy and compassion. The difference in my feeling response is directly related to my perceptions about what her behavior means to me.

If I Believe that Karen is so worn out after work that she needs some peace and quiet before she will have enough energy to discuss the day I will have empathy for her and be peaceful. However, if I think Karen is mad and rejecting me I may feel upset. My feelings of sad, mad or glad are a direct result of my thoughts. Karen does not "make me feel" mad, sad or glad". My feelings are under my control.

I could say: "You make me so mad when you come home from work and don't even say a word. What is wrong with you? Why are you so cruel to me?"

This statement is irrational. It is not only factually wrong it gives my wife power over my thoughts and feelings. I am asking her to control me. When I use You Statements to describe the situation I submit my freedom to you and making myself a Victim of your behavior.

When I was a boy I loved to listen to radio shows that featured super heroes. I imagined I was one of them. My favorite was the guy who was said to have the "Power to control men's minds." I decided to study psychology and learn how to do that. However, I was disappointed to discover that I can barely control my own mind let alone others'. I must allow others to be responsible for their thinking, feeling and acting.

Many years ago I was working with a young man who had chosen a homosexual lifestyle. His mother came in and said, "Read his mind and then hypnotize him and make him change. You are a professional therapist!" It is impossible to do that.

Many times in the past I have allowed others to victimize me. I played the Victim role and chose to give Persecutors the power to *make me "feel"* guilty, ashamed, fearful or responsible. I am learning, however, to think for myself and choose to take the peace that Jesus gives rather than the anxiety that the world prefers.

Since I do not like to give power over my thoughts and feelings to others I try to use "I Statements". Example: "Karen, I do not feel good when you come into the house without speaking to me. I start wondering if I have done something wrong. Is everything O.K. with you?"

For many years I was "Reacting" in emotional pain to the actions and words of others, especially loved ones. I finally decided that I was too close to them in an emotional sense. Their slightest emotional upset was a virus that made me cough. "Reacting" to others means that my mind, emotions and body automatically go into high gear when another does. Imagine you are glued to your wife at the hips. Even her slightest movement would result in your immediate "Reaction". The intensity of my "Reaction" is directly related to her action.

If I were to go into an angry rage when Karen came home without speaking it would mean that I was "Over Reacting". Karen's behavior might be a level three on a ten-point scale of thoughtlessness but my emotional "Reaction" was at least an eight or nine. A close friend of mine received a doctorate many years ago. He was the very first person in his family to attend college let alone do advanced graduate work so he fully expected his family to celebrate with him. However, the siblings gave him a verbal lashing for "Trying to show off and be better than the rest of them." They "Reacted" strongly and negatively to what he thought was a positive event. My friend is still painfully "Reacting" in his mind and memories to their "Reactions".

"Responding" to others' actions is very different. When my mental and emotional faculties are correlated with reality I "Respond". I do not "Overreact" but have emotions that are appropriate to the situation. The siblings "Reacted" to my friend's good news because they perceived him to be haughty.

**Reactions:** Emotional states that are more intense than the situation warrants.

**Responses:** Emotions in line with the facts.

"I Statements" rather than "You Statements" tend to foster less Reactivity. I am choosing to feel my own feelings. No one else is causing me to feel this way. (Note: My immediate feelings may be automatic. Over time I can change my feelings by renewing my mind according to the truth. It usually takes at least 30 to 40 days to change a habitual feeling.)

We use an **ABCD** acrostic to show how this works.

A = Activating Event

B = Beliefs about the A

C = Consequential Feelings, mad, sad, glad, that arise as a result of my Beliefs

D = Decisive Behavior describes what I decide to do because of the way I feel

Most people say, "You make me feel mad or sad or bad when you do those things. It is usually better to say, "I make myself feel mad when I see you reject me and that makes me believe that you do not love me." We usually skip **B** and go from **A to C to D** but that leaves our Belief System out of the equation. This short cut can cause us a lot of grief, so get to know your own Belief System.

The Belief System consists of:

- Perceptions
- Self-talk
- Memories
- Convictions
- Values

### **From Possibilities to Pessimism**

Our unique Perceptions arise from family background; personality, memories, etc can cause miscommunication and misunderstanding. If I perceive your request to resolve a miscommunication problem to mean that I have failed you will be hurt. However, if you see my volunteering as a gesture of love and support you will probably feel good. Here is the rub. Perceptions can vary in accuracy from Zero to 100%. "I say tomahto, you say tomato..."

Once I perceive that my boss attacks me with Criticism and Contempt my automatic mental, emotional and physical Reaction will be defensive. If I perceive others are continually attacking me, I will live in a state of emotional flooding. Many people have Belief Systems filled with Criticism and Contempt. They may have suffered from trauma or abuse as children and developed mental processes that assume all people are dangerous.

I will begin to RUMINATE about the Perceived attack and replay it with my self-talk long after it has passed, leaving me in a state of perpetual attack, defensiveness and emotional flooding. My ability to remember an attack with audio and video clarity can lead me into a state of continual attack and exhausting defensiveness.

### **Pain is inevitable but Misery is optional**

Sometimes the ways we think are unconsciously designed to make Misery our best friend. If we go through life seeing Adversity as overwhelming and ourselves as helpless/hopeless victims we will live in misery.

Even though we may have grown up in a world that gave others power over our thoughts and feelings we know that we can change. Those of us who once believed that we were but Helpless Victims to people and events us know differently. We have learned to become Victors. The slogan above says it all. Pain is inevitable but misery is optional. People with a Victim Mentality think that the pain of life inevitably leads to misery.

Others cannot handle pain. They simply deny that pain is real. Some groups teach that sickness; disappointment and rejection are simply figments of our imagination. All we have to do is imagine that we are healthy, wealthy and wise and the imagery will come true. It is sometimes called the, "Name it and claim it/Blab it and grab it theology," and has caused untold amounts of pain and misery. Since the premise is false the results will always disappoint and the final condition will be misery.

Illness and disease are real as are evil people, bad marital partners and crazy kids. Pain is real. But misery is usually the result of our mental processes.

Robert Schuller has become famous for his "Possibility Thinking" talks. I was frankly critical of his approach until I read the research about emotional and spiritual health. Now I must eat crow and admit that he has a lot of good things to say. Schuller agrees with Dr. Martin Seligman, former President of the American Psychological Association. Dr. Seligman has written extensively about the power of the Belief System to produce hope or despair, pessimism or possibilities. He and other "Cognitive Therapists" have helped others around the world.

I have developed an acrostic to assess our **ABCD** thinking style. If we have a habit of Perceiving painful events in a Pessimistic manner, we can stop it before it kills us. The acrostic is **APART**.

- **Adversity** = Any Activating Event that I Perceive as a threat
- **Pessimism** = A basic attitude/belief system that tends to see the negative aspects of life. The Pessimistic Belief System can be changed but takes some work and at least a month of renewed thinking. The Pessimistic Belief System is filled with Self-Talk of self-Criticism and Contempt.

- Personal Flaw: It is my/your brokenness that causes the Adversity
- Pervasive: The Flaw is all encompassing
- Permanent: The flaw cannot be changed
- Perfect: I should have no flaws and imperfections
- **Action**: Consequential Feelings of Anguish or Anger lead to sadness or interpersonal attacks that move us from into misery
- **Ruminate** = My mind chronically replays the Adversity and P's leading to increased Anguish and Misery
- **Traumatizing Thoughts** = My thinking is black or white and we re-traumatize ourselves every time we remember the original pain.

The Pessimist says: "An elder told my wife that I preach badly. I am a failure. This will never change and I can never get over it so it is hopeless. I could attack him but it will not do any good. I better leave the ministry."

A Possibility Thinker develops ways to overcome Adversity. They "Take a licking and keep on ticking. The elder did not really mean that I couldn't preach well. He just had a bad day and I will overlook the comments because I can improve."

### **Male Female relationships**

Women, although weaker in bodily physique than a man, have the power to overcome, kill or maim him with words. Before marriage she controls her man with the promise of romance. After marriage and sexual satisfaction this approach does not work. She cannot as easily manage and control the relationship and gets frustrated enough to use emotional language.

He cannot control her with words and tries to manage his emotions by acting like a stone wall. He refuses to listen to her; interact with her or open himself to her. He may get over involved in work, hobbies, or play. Religious leaders have a perfect alibi for overwork. We say it is God that forces us to avoid a relationship. Therapists and theologians may begin to spout concepts and large ideas rather than tune in to the wife.

This is one of the most damaging thing that can happen to a couple or family. Gottman calls it "One of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" because it is so destructive.

The man is normally more interested in work, male friends and sports than his wife. After marriage most men become interested in performing well in

outside activities while the wife becomes deeply involved in children and the home. She wants to change that scenario, of course, so she attacks him for abandoning her and the kids. He withdraws even more into his own world of work and golf and leaves her to be a mother. She nags but he gets defensive and he withdraws. The more she accuses him the more fragile he becomes and the more he resists her. This deadly cycle can drive them to awful behaviors. It is not her fault or his fault. It is their fault.

In an act of desperation she resorts to angry challenges to get his attention. She feels abandoned, betrayed and hurt. She thinks he wants only sex or is frustrated that he is no longer interested in intimacy. This exacerbates the problem and he withdraws faster and more often.

Thinking that he cannot “hear or understand her” she becomes insistent and more attacking. Women are normally able to express their feelings more freely and may use this ability to attack their man. The cycle continues as he reacts and withdraws and she shouts ever more loudly. They are stuck in a dance of death.

Male attack the women they love through withdrawal of attention and affection. He is more sensitive than she to emotional pain so intimate discussions cause him to fear her. Intimacy means he will get hurt so he is dedicated to work, sports, male friends and external activities where he gets affirmation. The guys affirm him, as do his bosses and colleagues. He is a hero at work but a bum at home.

God created a man to protect his wife and children. Males for the past 10,000 years or so have been deeply involved in wars, hunting and gathering and physical labor. All develop physical qualities that reward action and a terrific Fight or Flight Syndrome. Male bodily functions are designed to make a living or to destroy attackers. Any threat is automatically met with a physical reaction designed to Fight an enemy or take Flight lest they overcome us.

This causes a tremendous challenge for modern men. The threats of today are rarely physical or personal but arise from interpersonal conflict with people we love rather than a wild animal or attacking warrior. It is mis-communication, lack of time together, difficulty with the extended family, high expectations, and marital and family conflict lead to the Fight/Flight Syndrome.

In the past times we men knew what to do if a cougar jumped out of a tree and snarled. Either kill it or climb a tree real fast. But what does he do when his wife attacks his manhood or threatens his courage? No wonder men like football. We can root for a 250 pound back who hits a runner as hard as he can and make me secretly wish I could Fight somebody without going to jail.

If a male believer of 220 pounds feels threatened by his wife of 100 pounds he is faced with a terrible dilemma. His body says, Fight her or Run away. Any man who abhors domestic violence will resist the Fight mode and Withdraw. It is the only rational response he can take to protect himself and his wife. But, it sends her the wrong message.

She may see his withdrawal is a lack of love when it is in fact definitely a loving act because it is protecting her. By missing the meaning she gets angrier and increases tries to get his attention. She says to herself, "He does not hear me" so she gets louder and more aggressive. She calls him names and attacks his character.

This results in even more Stonewalling and withdrawing. The cycle of protection continues but is still misread by a woman who is created to think and feel differently than a man. His sweet wife concludes that he is emotionally dead and physically deaf. So, she gets louder and more insistent that he listens!

In a mad frenzy the man leaves home and retires to the gym or bar to talk to some men. He is confused and tells his buddies what is happening. They are having the same problems and they tell him to play more golf or drink more beer. "Nobody understands women. Just leave them alone" is the advice he gets. He has no place to dispel his rage and frustration and he has no idea why the woman he loves is so mean to him.

In some cases he finds a woman who understands him and listens to his tales of woe. She neither attacks nor does she expect him to fix her roof or play with the kids or help her mother move. Her listening soon turns to passion and the end is near.

The same things happen in the Christian community but we go to church rather than a bar. Women take classes on making him love them more and men study about submission. Neither works very well. Some groups, like Job's friends, give bad advice: just pray more, repent, submit, change jobs or curse God and die. Many read Dobson's book titled Love Must Be Tough and she decides she has to be tougher.

In many cases Satan provides a man for the abandoned wife who is warm, empathic, well spoken and who has a wife who is harsh, mean and callous to his needs. Or a woman who cares, listens, respects and does not attack or withdraw. Passion rises and love is once again in bloom. This is not the answer, of course, but it is tempting.

Breaking the dysfunctional cycle is the best approach. Insight, understanding and a calm head are essential to resolving the cycle. Females must understand that her man is **TOO SENSITIVE** not deaf. Males must understand that their wives want **The Intimacy** like before marriage. She does not really want to castrate him even if it feels that way. Both must learn how to change their dance.

### Scripture guides us

Although my Sunday school teacher warned me to avoid psychology, I discovered that Jesus was a great psychologist. Let us review Matthew 5: 21-26 as it describes the personal and family damaging process.

*You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.*

Wow, this is powerful stuff. It is one of the few times that Jesus warned us about going to hell. He mentions three stages of conflict and they correlate exactly with Gottman's research.

<b>Gottman</b>	<b>Matthew</b>
Contentment-Peace	Peace
Complaints-Anger (I do not like the way this is happening)	Angry feelings
Criticism-Raca (You are failing in action)	Calling a person Raca (stupid)
Contempt-Fool (You are a failure)	Character Assassination (fool)

The Conflict Cycle shows how misunderstandings grow into destructive interactions. It is consistent with the teachings of Jesus. We all would like to be in a home where Contentment/Peace reigns all the time but that is

impossible. In fact, such a state would be harmful to us for it is only when people are discontent that we grow and change. This leads to a Complaint but frustration and anger can get out of hand and lead us to attack with Criticism when we do not get the results we want.

Over time when Criticisms fail we move into Contemptuous attacks of disrespect and assassination of the person's character as a man, a woman, a wife, a provider or a Christian. Jesus warns us that Character Assassinations and Disrespect makes us worthy of hell. Hell is allowing the devil to tear us APART.

Thankfully, Jesus does not leave us in hell but tells us how to resolve conflicts that get out of hand. The first step is: *Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.*

Only two forgivers can survive marriage. A chronic lack of forgiveness will inevitably lead to a Root of Bitterness that develops into Criticism, Contempt, Continual Defensiveness, Emotional Flooding, and Divorce legal or emotional. Anger is not fatal but a root of bitterness almost always is and, as scripture says, it produces multiple generations of bitter fruit.

*Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. <sup>16</sup>From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*

*Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are bitter and do not give the devil a foothold.*

*Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Eph 4:selected*

Complaints can be useful to a family or church. Disagreements can lead to better understanding and relationships. However, we need to get conflicts

straightened out before they grow into Bitterness that leads to Criticism and Contempt. Once that happens it is difficult to change. It normally requires a well-trained couple counselor or church consultant to serve as an objective third person.

Gottman's research confirms my view that the Bible is consistent with modern psychology and physiology. The Cycle of Conflict Intensity is a psychological and physical explanation of the fall. The processes described in Genesis Three indicate that our fallen nature drives us to try to manipulate and control each other.

The emotional state that most often leads to marital failure is anger that leads to B.S. (Blame and Shame). When anger increases and our attacks fail to achieve the desired results, our bodies simply go into a state of high intensity defensiveness. Over time, the mental/ physical/ emotional Fight/Flight state becomes a chronic condition, leaving the couple out of control and out of their minds with pain.

St. Paul was a brilliant family therapist. Even if he never married, the Holy Spirit gave him powerful insights into circular causality. He applies those insights to both the biological family and the church family.

*This is a great mystery but it speaks of Christ and the church. (Eph. 5: 32)*

This verse suggests a systemic/circular interaction of church and family life. Married life is mysterious but it is a model for the church. Christ's relationship with the church is mysterious but it is a model for married life. A dynamic relationship exists between my family and church family. Paul also indicates that the relationship between parents and their children is connected to health and long life.

*Children obey your parents in the Lord for that is right. Honor your father and your mother. This is the first commandment with a promise; that you shall live long on the earth. (Eph.6: 1-3)*

- We bless our future generations by honoring our past generations. By developing a good relationship with our parents and grandparents, we bless our children and our children's children. Honor, respect and blessings toward our fathers and mothers will bring a spiritual blessing to our children and grandchildren. How this works is mysterious but it is God's promise.
- We also minister life or death to our children by our parenting methods.

*Fathers do not provoke your children to wrath but bring them up in the nurture and discipline of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:4)*

*Fathers do not exasperate your children so they will not lose heart. (Col. 3:21)*

In both cases, Paul speaks to fathers. Is it because fathers are more prone to anger and harsh punishment? Is this a result of the Fall? God told Adam that men would work the land with *angry emotions in their faces*. Is male anger more often expressed with our children? If it is, we must be on guard to develop gentleness. The term *provoke to wrath* indicates action that is harmful to the child. Wrath means to have a mind-set of bitterness, settled hurt and revenge. It can also be translated to be beside ones self with anger or out of my mind with rage. Is the current epidemic of angry, vengeful children partly a response to parents who have provoked them so badly that they are out of their minds? How do we provoke and how do we bring peace?

Instead of provoking children to bitterness, we are to *rear children in the nurture and discipline of the Lord*. Nurture in Greek means *to connect positive action and thought together to train a child appropriately*. The emphasis is on the environment or milieu of a home, not simply the content of the words that we speak. We rear children in the nurture of the Lord by creating a family environment that feels as loving as the groups Jesus led. He told the Apostles to *Let the little children come unto me and do not forbid them from being in my presence for that is the Kingdom of God*. A Christian home should feel like being in a cell group with Jesus as leader. Can you imagine Jesus as cell leader? How would He relate to each child and parent? How would He discipline us and how would He encourage us?

The second term, *discipline* means *to put ideas, especially positive ideas, into another person's mind*. To discipline is to disciple or train the child. It has to do with reward and punishment as well as instruction. Our discipline must be aimed at developing positive habits rather than punishing harshly. While *nurturing* emphasizes the non-verbal and relational aspects of parenting without any words being expressed, *discipline* includes teaching by positive words. Both place more importance on the systemic, non-verbal and unspoken modeling than on the content of our lectures. In family life, process always overcomes content.

The Colossians text contains a similar warning to the Ephesians' text but uses the term *exasperates* to describe a wounded heart or spirit. If a child develops *inner wrath* or *loses heart*, he is said to have a wounded spirit. Spiritual

wounds can lead to depression, unhealthy dependence and a heart full of bitterness. Roots of bitterness have devastating long-term effects on both individuals and families since the whole system will be affected for many generations.

*See to it that none of you fails to obtain the grace of God and allows a root of bitterness to spring up, causing trouble and by it defiling many. (Heb. 12:15)*

Our bitter roots defile future generations for they bring toxic poisons to the lives of our children. Harsh, unjust and unloving behaviors plant seeds that bloom in future generations. On the other hand, fruitful generations are the result of blessing past generations and rearing our offspring with love, mercy and grace. Karen and I prayed to bless our children and grandchildren years before they were born. Our two children and grandson are evidence of the fruit of those prayers. You can affect the future of your family by honoring the past, words of family blessing and your prayers of faith.

Kristin Chan was going through a difficult time in her marriage when she became pregnant. Because of anger toward her husband Francis, she also resented the fact that she was pregnant and considered an abortion. Her beliefs about the worth of every child, however, convinced her to carry the baby to term. For nine months Kristin had emotions of anger, resentment and bitterness toward her husband and anxious fear that she had damaged her child in the womb.

A daughter, Kari, was born and Kristin interacted with her with guilt, shame and fear that led to being over protective and co-dependent. Kari sensed her mother's over concern and reacted in a passive-aggressive manner, choosing "bad friends" and acting out at school. This caused Kristin to experience even more fear leading to a cycle of increasing anxious attempts to protect her daughter.

At age sixteen, Kristin brought Kari to see a counselor at Lifeway because she was in trouble at school. The Counselor saw the interactive pattern. Mother was over protective and daughter's was rebellious. Although the original root of bitterness had occurred many years before and the marriage had been healed, the pattern persisted between mother and child.

Kristin discovered, examined and confronted her irrational guilt and shame. She also dealt with her past anger and forgave her husband. This enabled her to stop rewarding Kari for her inappropriate actions. The pattern of

dysfunction was both inside Kristin as well as between them. The cycle was difficult to change because it had been going on for sixteen years.

If you want to have good discipline, make sure you clean up past relationships with your family of origin. Also try work to clean up your relationships with your spouse and your own inner thinking. Unresolved issues of anger, wrath, bitterness and guilt can poison the ways we think, feel and behave toward our kids. Above all, ask the Lord for peace in your heart. Allow peace to permeate your relationships.

We dare not miss the grace of God. Filial piety, filial duty and filial responsibility are not enough. We must practice filial grace. Confucius preached filial piety, duty, and responsibility but the concept of filial grace comes from scripture. We look backwards not simply to honor and respect our past but to offer thanks to God for our ancestors even if they were not believers. We must not require justice of the past but grant forgiveness to those whom failed to love us and nurture us. By holding our ancestors to a standard of righteous judgment, we will sow roots of bitterness that will spring up within our own hearts and lives. Bitterness results in generations of poison and pollution. Spiritual toxins have the power to curse and destroy our children. A mind-set of grace, however, will bring generations of blessings to our family heritage.

St. Paul restates for families the theme he made earlier for the entire congregation.

*Let nothing come out of your mouth that does not bless others. Only speak those words that will minister grace to those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you along with all malice. And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ forgave you. (Eph. 4:29-31)*

The term grieve is the opposite of *to give joy*. We grieve the Holy Spirit when we treat others badly or harshly. Can you imagine causing God sorrow and pain rather than blessing and joy? As it says in Proverbs 18:21: "Life or death is in the power of the tongue. Those who love its use will have to eat its fruit." We are connected not only to each other but also to God. God is in our emotional, relational, family system! God is affected by our behavior towards each other. He is impacted by the way we live our family life.

Note: Conflict is inevitable but Criticism and Contempt are optional.