

Making Those Early Christian Marriage Adjustments Worksheet

Dennis Rainey

In at least one aspect, marriage is like football. In a close game, the winning team is usually the one that made the most significant adjustments in strategy along the way. That's what effective coaches do at halftime-give their players the key adjustments that will gain them the advantage in the final quarters.

A winning marriage requires the same mind-set. A husband and wife need to recognize that surprises requiring proactive adjustments await them in their relationship. Barbara and I were no exception. Perhaps the biggest adjustment we faced early in marriage resulted from our differing backgrounds. Barbara grew up in a nice suburban setting near Chicago and later in a suburb of Houston. I grew up in Ozark, Missouri, a tiny town in the sticks. Barbara came into our marriage a refined young lady. I was a genuine hillbilly. In some ways, we seemed to have come from two different countries, and on some issues, different galaxies.

Some issues triggering the need for adjustments in marriage are major: being raised in a dual- or single-parent family; being an only child or growing up with several siblings; coming from an economically challenged family or a family that had it all; growing up with parents who did not embrace religious faith. The list goes on and on: opposite personalities, differing cultural backgrounds.

Minimally, a couple will have to adjust to differing traditions, values, habits, and rules learned in unique backgrounds. As time passes, other adjustments to sexual performance, financial pressures, and job demands may be required. And let's not forget a big adjustment in a small package-spelled B-A-B-Y! That's right: the first child.

Often the minor differences cause the most frustration and require the most creative flexibility. Someone has said, "We are worn down less by the mountain we climb than by the grain of sand in our shoe."

One of those tiny grains of sand can be the toilet seat. The husband may come from a family of all boys where the toilet seat's default position was up. If this guy marries a girl from a family of all girls, where the seat remained in the horizontal dimension, you know the potential for conflict and the need for adjustment.

In our home, for years a grain of sand was the way I "helped" Barbara by putting my socks in the clothes hamper wrong side out so that "the dirty side got washed." She has finally trained me to do it the "right" way.

Every married individual must adjust to qualities in a spouse that were not noticed or were ignored during the dreamy days of dating. How many people

have encountered a painful frustration in marriage and asked themselves, Why did I do this? Did I marry the wrong person?

If these questions arise, you need to confront them immediately. If you don't resolve these doubts promptly, they will hang indefinitely like a distant storm cloud on the horizon of your relationship.

Anyone struggling with this question should go back to the biblical admonition in Genesis 2:24-25, where spouses are commanded to leave, cleave, become one flesh, and be completely transparent with each other. If you are bothered by such doubts, face them by getting away alone for a weekend to seek out the Lord and pray for His peace on this matter.

Let me assure you that you are married to the right person. How do I know this? Because God hates divorce and wants your marriage to last. You may have gone against some biblical admonitions in getting to where you are in your marriage, but the Scripture is clear: You're not to try to undo a "mistake" and, in the process, make a second mistake.

The solution to handling issues of adjustment lies in regarding your relationship as more important than your individual values and desires. If you hold on tightly to what you want, you'll never get to the point where you understand that the well-being of the overall relationship is what ultimately matters.

Here are some points to remember as you make adjustments in your relationship:

First, recognize that adjustments are inevitable. Every married couple has to deal with the grains of sand in their shoes. It's 100 percent normal. If you realize up front that you will have to make changes in your behaviour and learn to tolerate frustrating traits in your spouse, your attitude will be more in line with what James wrote: "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials" (James 1:2). He said to consider it all joy when you encounter trials, not if you encounter them.

Second, understand that adjustments have a divine purpose. God uses these issues to combine two unique people into something new called "us." I also believe that God uses adjustments to teach us how to love another dramatically different, imperfect human being. At prime moments, God will use your marriage to show you how to love the unlovely.

Third, ask God for wisdom on how to live with this person who's different from you. Instead of trying to change your spouse and correct all of the bad habits, how can you accept the situation or adjust yourself? Barbara realized this early in our marriage. She recalls, "I had to realize that God had to change Dennis. I couldn't." Marriage may be an institution, but it isn't a reformatory.

Fourth, be more concerned about your own rough spots than those of your spouse. Jesus said we should take the log out of our own eye before trying to take the speck out of someone else's eye. That's truly advice made in heaven for marriage. If I'm not willing to make changes, how can I expect Barbara to change?

Fifth, make a commitment to work through the inevitable adjustments. The apostle Paul provided guidelines for handling adjustment rhubarbs when they come your way: "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself" (Philippians 2:3). That's a description of a grace-based marriage-giving your partner room to be different and flexing on his or her behalf.

Sometimes at our FamilyLife marriage conferences, the speaker asks couples to face each other and say aloud, "You are not my enemy." Later in the conference husbands and wives go a step farther when they say to each other, "You are my friend."

Do you consider your wife or husband a friend? If not, is it possible that the two of you have not adjusted to each other's differences and are letting the "nitpicky" issues in life rub away the good feelings in your relationship?

Making adjustments is usually not easy, but the rewards are worth the effort. What changes could you make today that will communicate clearly that your spouse is a dear friend, not an enemy?

My co-host on the radio program "FamilyLife Today", Bob Lepine, has used a very practical tool to ease adjustments in his marriage. According to Bob, he and his wife, Mary Ann, express their individual preferences on a given topic by degrees. For example, when trying to decide where to eat out, both persons state their wishes on several restaurants. If neither one wants to champion a particular eating place, it's eliminated. Then Bob may say, "I've got a mild preference for Chinese food." Mary Anne may respond, "Well, I have a pretty strong preference for Mexican food." Bob probably replies, "Well, your strong preference beats my mild preference. Let's eat Mexican."

Of course, the next time it may switch-by then Bob may be dying for some Chinese, and Mary Ann acquiesces.

The person with the weaker preference is usually the one who winds up flexing and letting the other person have his or her strong preference. But the person not getting his wish-this time-experiences the joy of seeing the other person get pleasure out of the strong preference.

Twenty-five Great Expectations for Your Marriage

Dennis and Barbara Rainey

Challenges Most Couples Face During the First Three to Five Years of Marriage:

1. Finances
2. Relating to the opposite sex
3. Loneliness
4. In-laws
5. Romance and affection
6. Spiritual growth together
7. Roles of husband and wife
8. Communication
9. Values and lifestyle choices
10. Trials and suffering
11. Where to attend church
12. Differences (including male/female, backgrounds, religious training, regional)
13. Travel
14. Debt
15. Children
16. Entertainment
17. Weekends
18. Traditions (how to handle holidays, birthdays, and other celebrations)
19. Resolving conflict
20. Work and Career
21. Vacations
22. Priorities (schedule)
23. Sexual intimacy
24. Roles of mother and father
25. Selfishness

Most couples face common challenges in marriage. If you don't discuss and resolve the differences between you and your spouse, you're headed for rough marital waters.

In their book, [*Starting Your Marriage Right*](#), Dennis and Barbara Rainey outline four ways to resolve "great expectations."

1. When you married, you began a lifelong commitment to **love and forgiveness**.
Remain committed. Love always. Remember, "love covers a multitude of sins." (1 Peter 4:8)
2. Your marriage won't grow without **communication and understanding**.
Communication means talking and active listening. You'll know you understand your spouse when you can verbally express your mate's actual needs and desires and he or she agrees with that expression. Communication is vital to clarifying your needs. The Bible urges husbands to "live with their wives in an understanding way." (1 Peter 3:7) Guys, that means you have to seek to understand. Ladies, that means you have to help him understand you.
3. You've heard the old saying, "walk a mile in my shoes."
In order to develop **God's perspective of your mate**, you may need to do just that. Remember, God selected your spouse for you. Accept His provision, knowing that He has an agenda for your life through unmet expectations.
4. **Don't give up on your dreams**.
All of the things you imagined your marriage to be may not come true. God may have a new dream for you to live together. Talk about your dreams. Then dream together.

Things You Expect from Your Relationship Exercise

Unless we talk about those things and bring our expectations to the surface, our mate may not know our wishes, and we may find ourselves facing an energy-sapping gap between our desires and our reality.

God does have an expectation for your marriage relationship. It's called "forever-love" or as we see it described in the Bible—agape—or unconditional, accepting love. Read 1 Corinthians 13 to find out more about this kind of love.

As you beginning to understand God's expectation of your marriage and for you, his Spirit will reveal and convict you of areas that require change. **Remember, you cannot change your spouse.** But, God gives you the power to change. God also works in the lives of others to grow and change them.

1. **Make a list** of things you expect from the relationship and what you believe your partner expects. Separately, your partner must also create the same two lists.

Things You Expect

Things Your Partner Expects

Finances_____

Finances_____

Relating to the Opposite Sex

Relating to the Opposite Sex

Loneliness_____

Loneliness_____

In-laws_____

In-laws_____

Romance and Affection

Romance and Affection

Spiritual Growth Together

Spiritual Growth Together

Communication

Communication

Values and Lifestyle Choices

Values and Lifestyle Choices

Trials and Suffering

Trials and Suffering

Where to Attend Church

Where to Attend Church

Differences

Differences

male/female_____

male/female_____

background_____

background_____

religious training_____

religious training_____

Travel_____

Travel_____

Debt_____

Debt_____

Children_____

Children_____

Entertainment_____

Entertainment_____

Weekends_____

Weekends_____

Traditions_____

Traditions_____

Resolving Conflict_____

Resolving Conflict_____

Work and Career_____

Work and Career_____

Vocations_____

Vocations_____

Priorities (schedule)_____

Priorities (schedule) _____

Sexual Intimacy_____

Sexual Intimacy_____

Roles of Mother and Father

Roles of Mother and Father

Selfishness_____

Selfishness_____

Anger _____

Anger _____

Unhappiness _____

Unhappiness _____

Illness _____

Illness _____

Time Out Protocol

Time Out Protocol

Other _____

Other _____

2. **Compare and discuss your lists**, after you have completed all the categories. Focus on what you each would need to change in order to display unconditional and accepting love.
3. **Revise your current lists**, finalizing an agreement about what you believe would be acceptable for a mutually satisfying relationship.