

# Becoming Married, Staying Married

*A Guide for African American Couples*

Marcus Small

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## *Introduction*

A young woman came into my office, wide-eyed, excited, and full of joy and self-confident assurance. “Pastor, it’s happened! God has sent me the one I’m going to marry!” She was looking right at me, but held a long, far-off gaze full of love-struck emotion, mixed in with a look of “I hope he doesn’t think I’ve lost it.” She continued, “I asked God to send me someone. I told the Lord I would stop fighting and just open myself to God’s will, and whoever the Lord chose to send me that’s who God wants me to be with. When Reggie came into my life I knew he was the one!”

Is this you? Have you found “the one”? Or, if you’ve been married for a while, do you remember this feeling?

One of the joys of being a pastor is witnessing this moment in peoples’ lives. Women and men come to see me, filled with the elation of the recent proposal and the joy of a mutual decision to marry. They seem so happy and so sure.

But the looks on their faces often change to concern when I ask them to schedule an appointment with their fiancé so that they can begin their premarital counseling. Almost immediately, it’s like I’ve told them a family member has died. They

look at me with such disappointment: “Really, Pastor, do you think that’s necessary? I mean I just told you this is the work of the Lord. I see God’s hand in this . . . God has *sent* him to me! We just need to plan the wedding!”

This is where the work of marriage begins for many couples. The truth is that couples deciding to get married need to prepare themselves as much as possible for the life journey they will share together. Some couples are hesitant and comply only to satisfy my requirement in order to perform their wedding. But many welcome the chance to begin to explore together what this journey might entail.

If you are reading this book, it is because you want to explore what it means to become married, a process that only begins with the wedding ceremony. And if this book has been thrust into your hands by your fiancé, friend, or pastor, and you’ve been told you must read it, well, I hope you’ll agree with me soon about how important this conversation is for you and your marriage.

Let’s be real. People get married for all kinds of reasons. One of those reasons may be to escape a past that they are all too eager to forget. Counseling may bring up issues someone is trying to forget or hide from a future spouse. Maybe she won’t want to get married to you if she knows these things.

It is a risk. But I’m convinced it is a risk couples must take if they want to create a healthy, long-lasting relationship. Believe me, your spouse also has issues. And you do not need to share absolutely everything with your spouse. But if you both can trust each other and commit to this process of becoming married, I assure you that you will also become more comfortable with yourselves and better individuals.

## THE ROLLER COASTER OF MARRIAGE

I love roller coasters, the bigger the better. There is something about looking at that mountain of twists and turns while standing in line with anticipation. People get on and return with looks

of excitement and adrenaline in their faces, and I can hardly contain myself knowing it will be the same with me. Once it's finally my turn, attendants help me into the ride and instruct me how to secure myself for the ride. Before they give the "OK" sign to start the ride, they come by and check to make sure that everyone is safe and secure. The attendant at the microphone shouts additional instructions—what to do with your hands, make sure you don't stand up, make sure you are in the seat at all times. No matter how ready I think I am, there are rules, regulations, and suggestions to help me have the best experience possible.

Couples who make the decision to get married feel the excitement and adrenaline rush that marriage brings. Enjoy that rush! Sure, your married friends can give you some advice on what it's like for them, but there are some things that you need to know before you get on the marriage roller coaster to ensure a better ride. If you don't know what to expect, you may want to get off before you even get started. This book is for couples who want to prepare themselves in order to have a good ride.

## MARRIAGE IS MORE THAN ROMANCE

The main reason couples jump onto the marriage rollercoaster without buckling their seatbelts is because they are overwhelmed with all the love they are feeling. Love, in its simplest form, is seen as the ultimate marriage fixer, the binder of all things difficult in relationships. Many couples believe this romantic love is the medicine that will keep them together through all situations, no matter how challenging or difficult things get.

I believe that love indeed can bind us together and that romance is a key element of married love. When we enter into the marriage covenant with one another, we have the opportunity to be servants of God in the truest understanding of ministry. Ministry is simply defined as service, and when we are married, we enter into service for each other. We not only offer ourselves to service, but we also partner with another individual to do service together. Our spouse becomes someone we share

a life with and also the person we share our ministry and faith with. The things that are done as a couple, the lives that are touched, the possible children and other family members that are blessed by the couple are all done essentially through the ministry of marriage. Marriage is a covenant between two people who believe that God is in the process of creating something with their union. But to understand what God is up to, we need to understand how marriage works as individuals.

### CHALLENGE YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

The first challenge for couples is to take a hard look at the ideas and perceptions they have about marriage. Our perceptions of marriage often have little to do with the person we're getting married to and have everything to do with what we want, what we've dreamed of, and what we've been taught, consciously and unconsciously, about marriage. It is a challenge to question preconceived notions and turn them into a beneficial process that develops a healthy and productive marriage. Part of this process is making sure that there is a healthy understanding not only of what marriage is, but also of what a marriage should *become*. As I will say countless times in this book, marriage is a process of becoming. It never ends.

As a couple getting married, or recently married, you probably are not thinking a lot about what your marriage will look like in ten, twenty, or thirty years. Sure, you may have thought about where you might live or what your children might look like should you choose and be able to have or adopt them. But few couples beginning their marriage journey see themselves years away from their wedding date and contemplate what their marriage will become.

- How will you solve problems?
- How will you deal with trying situations—what happens when one of you gets laid off from work and you have only one income?



- How will you work through tough decisions about an annoying family member moving in and how long he will be allowed to stay? Or what if one of you gets promoted and is required to move and relocate to a different state?
- How might you make it through the death of a child, or parenting a child with special needs who needs lifelong care?
- How will you handle an infidelity if it occurs?

Many things happen for which no couple can prepare. Moments such as these bring tremendous stress to the relationship. Life will test your marriage in some very real ways: the love you feel can get tested, the fears you had can become realities, and what you once thought God brought together can be questioned with great frequency!

In case this is sounding too depressing, there is hope! Couples who have faced these challenges and countless others have managed to weather those storms and continue the process of becoming a couple. If the process is done right, couples learn not only more about each other, but also how to navigate through tough times together. They *become* a couple on a deeper level.

## WHAT'S YOUR COUPLE PERSONALITY?

As they go through life together, couples develop a certain kind of personality, a fingerprint, that becomes distinctly theirs. In the movies *Why Did I Get Married?* and *Why Did I Get Married Too?* we find couples who show their couple personalities. Patricia and Gavin initially were the “lovey-dovey” couple who talked and shared everything, even when things got difficult. Terry and Diane were the “true professionals” who worked hard on making their way up the corporate success ladder. Mike and Sheila were the “disconnected couple” who never seemed to understand one another. And Marcus and Angela

were the “fighting couple” who expressed themselves through conflict and tension.

Obviously, these couples are anything but perfect in their personalities. But they show that couples *become* something more than they are as individuals. Some couples who have been together forever still hug and kiss all over each other in public, making us nauseous with all their affections. We know couples that seem career driven and have a business-style approach to life, but somehow it works for them. There are couples who love to travel together and are always on the road. And, of course, there are those couples who seem to always be fighting and disagreeing about something. You hate to go out with them because you know they are going to embarrass you at the restaurant, but no matter how much they fuss, and no matter how much they argue, you know in the back of your mind neither of them is going anywhere.

What is your couple personality? Does it match your expectations of what you want it to be? Some couples feel defeated and deflated when their marriage doesn't look like what they imagined and they can feel that something is wrong. It might be. Or it might be that as a couple you offer a distinct personality that is a little different than both of you as individuals. The purpose of this book is to help you dialogue with your partner and begin a lifelong conversation so that you learn not only what it means to be married, but how to *become* married.

## WHAT IS PREMARITAL/MARRIAGE COUNSELING?

Premarital counseling is simply some guided space given to a couple for them to achieve their particular goal of building a healthy marriage. “Good” counseling methods today are based on scientific research data, psychological information, and family history to properly assess and understand individuals' behavior patterns. Premarital counseling should help you first understand yourselves as individuals, and what you each bring to the relationship, and then to recognize how your gifts and

baggage will be combined with what your partner brings. A dialogue then begins when you talk together about how you can navigate through those issues, assumptions, predictions, and expectations so that as individuals and as a couple you become better. Learning different techniques of communication, conflict resolution, and understanding of quality couple time all become methods in understanding what will be required of each of you to continue to develop a healthy marriage relationship.

Unfortunately, in our culture and especially in the African American community, a common understanding is that counseling is a sign of failure. If one sees a counselor, obviously there is a problem. While that can sometimes be the case, counseling is about getting clarity. We can get so caught up in the way we see things that we do not recognize other perspectives, ideas, approaches, and opinions. Premarital counseling helps couples, through the assistance of an objective party, broaden perspectives and learn how to improve the couple's connection and intimacy. Sometimes hearing a different perspective can help clear a clouded mind and open couples to ways of compromise that might not otherwise be seen.

Fortunately, a growing number of African Americans are discovering the benefits of counseling and therapy as assets to our communities. Historically, many understood that the church was the place where you took your troubles and you "turned them over to Jesus." This is certainly true, but the Lord has prepared some people to give us some helpful, outside guidance. In fact, the Greek word *Paraclete*, the word that we use for the "Holy Spirit," actually means "advocate" or "helper." The counselor serves as an instrument of the Holy Spirit to help guide, encourage, and console those who find themselves in situations where they need clarity.

### WHY A BOOK FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN COUPLES?

Simply put, our community needs to help those who choose to be married so that their marriages are stronger and our

community is strengthened. While marriage rates in the U.S. have plummeted in recent years, in 2011 fifty-five percent of whites were married, compared with thirty-one percent of African Americans.<sup>1</sup> This is alarming. When we look at marriage and what it means to the development and health not only of individuals but of a community as well, we have to wonder why our community is less coupled or able to sustain marriages than other communities.

This rapid decline in marriage has transformed how African Americans see family and how we see community. Our childrearing alone has changed with the decline of marriage as more households are becoming single parent homes. The U.S. Census reported that 52.1 percent of African American children were living in single parent homes. Without a doubt, children can grow and develop healthily in a single parent home, but the question must be asked: Why is that becoming the norm more than the exception?

In chapter 4 we will discuss the history of marriage in the African American community more in detail, but for now, I want to say that I believe that healthy, strong marriages can be good examples for the African American community. As was stated earlier, marriages aren't just for the individuals. Your marriage can serve as a ministry for the community. Spending time together before you get married to discuss how you will communicate, what you expect, and other matters can set you on the path to becoming married.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Part 1 of this book consists of five chapters about marriage in general. We will look at some assumptions about marriage and where those assumptions come from, how marriage might be seen as a ministry, what individuals each bring to a marriage, marriage in the African American community and how it is different, and what a healthy relationship looks like.

Part 2 of this book will examine what I call “becoming qualities” that will help any marriage remain healthy. We will look at these qualities as useful tools for good marriages. The qualities include having a good sense of self-awareness, effectively communicating, resolving conflict, learning the act of forgiveness, learning how to be flexible, learning the meaning of “marriage mature,” and expressing sexuality in a healthy way.

Each chapter ends with some questions for you to think about and hopefully discuss as a couple. And some suggested actions steps are also provided for you to consider.

Although this book speaks to both pre-marriage and recently married couples, the fact is that all couples can learn and refresh from these techniques and perspectives at any time in their relationship. Also, while written with African American couples in mind, most of the book is totally applicable for any marriage. For couples where just one of the spouses is African American, the information about particularities of African Americans and marriage will be especially helpful to discuss.

My prayer is that this book will open the door for you and your fiancé to have a conversation about your hopes and expectations of what you desire to become. The true success of all relationships is connection, and we who are in relationship need to work on those connections on a daily basis. I pray you experience joy on this journey of becoming. It can be a lovely ride.

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