



# INSTITUTE of CHRISTIAN GROWTH

*A Ministry of Carolina Evangelical Divinity School*

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## COMMENTARY

### SIXTY-TWO YEARS OF MARRIAGE

A friend of ours asked that we put into words the things we have done to have a successful marriage. Before we do, though, I have to make a few prefatory remarks concerning our backgrounds. I did not grow up in a loving home. My childhood home was filled with anger and unhappiness. The result was that my father stayed away from home since my mother blamed him for her unhappiness. Unfortunately, I responded to the anger in our household with reciprocal anger. At times, I had problems controlling it, and in my childhood I had many fights with my peers. The fights lasted until I was in prep school, I quit when I realized that it was wrong.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, came from a home where there was much love and little conflict. She had paralytic polio as a girl so she was subject to several operations, but managed to come out of her period of treatment unscathed emotionally because of the loving environment that she lived in.

Both of us had good educations. My folks expected me to go to Duke University so I went to Duke for both undergraduate and medical schools. Elizabeth went to Meredith, a Baptist girls' school in Raleigh. Both of us came

from Christian homes. My father was an authentic Christian; my mother thought she was. Elizabeth's parents were Christians and saw to it that she was exposed to the Gospel; at age 18 she was born again. I had gone to church all of my early life, but somehow I never "heard" the message although it was preached to me. I distinctly remember going to revivals, but never responded to any invitations to commit my life to the Lord. I grew up believing that I had to be successful in life if I was to have happiness. Mother taught me that I had to go to the "right church" and meet the "right people," so they could help me be successful. At age 22, I quit the church and spent my Sundays in other pursuits.



*Dating, before we were married.*

I dated many women in my life, beginning at age 14. Starved for love, I would imagine myself in love with one girl after another only to find my love was rather shallow. I would then go on to another. There was one girl who I did love desperately while in medical school, but she lied to me, and finally ran off with a Mormon after telling me goodbye. That resulted in a severe depression during my internship, precipitated by a sleep deprivation syndrome. When I finished my internship, I did not have a residency so I went to work in the state mental hospital in Raleigh, NC, where Elizabeth had just taken a job as a social caseworker. We both lived on the premises. She was unattached and was very available when I began to date her.

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We spent much time together, and I soon fell in love with her. After a year I took a child psychiatry residency back at Duke, but we continued dating. She decided to get an MSW and enrolled in graduate school at University of North Carolina. We continued to date while learning some things about marriage in our academic pursuits..

At the end of her first year she went to Atlanta to do a summer practicum in a children's center. I missed her so desperately that I wrote her as often as twice a day, and called her just to hear her voice. Finally, I asked if she would like to get married when she came home. She wanted to, and the story of our marriage began.

I drove to Atlanta and picked her up, bringing her back to her home in Raleigh. We both decided we would not have a big fancy marriage. So she bought a nice dress to be married in, and we made plans to have a small wedding without any frills at the local Presbyterian church. She attended this particular church while she was in college. Our wedding party consisted of our immediate family, and four of our best friends. The wedding was simple, and after the wedding we all went to Elizabeth's house for a reception. We then left on our honeymoon. I had a house on Harker's Island NC, and because we had no money we went there, and camped out for a week. We then came back to work. The remainder of this story is why we have a successful marriage. I will tell my side first.

Having grown up in a home of much discord, I made a vow to myself that I was not going to have a home like my parents had. I learned enough about anger control in my psychiatric training to know that if I got angry I should withdraw from the encounter until I cooled off. I would, therefore, leave the house and walk around the block until I had cooled off and could resolve the conflict in my mind. Later after I became a Christian, I had to give up my anger to God, and then I dealt with my anger by forgiving those who contributed to it as a child. I first, though, had to learn how to forgive in the name of Jesus and by his power (John 20:22,23).

The next thing I had to do was to learn to communicate not only my thoughts, and desires, but my feelings in a way that did not create conflict. I had to learn to confess my thoughts and feelings instead of expressing or repressing them. I did it very well with much effort and practice because I learned to use I statements that were not accusatory. The little mnemonic I used was one I learned about

later. I used "I think, I feel, I'd like" to express my thoughts and feelings. I have to say that I found this kind of communication allowed us to become closer in our relationship

The third thing I had to do was to learn to express my love for my wife. It was hard for me to say "I love you," because I was never told by my parents that they unconditionally loved me. I had no trouble writing it out, but saying it was very difficult. When I first said I love you to Elizabeth, I would choke on the words. I did, however, force myself to tell her I loved her until it became second nature. You see, I did not know how to verbally express love because of the lack of expression in my childhood home. It was also necessary for me to make non-sexual physical contact with my wife. I worked at it until I could do it without having to force myself to remember to do it. I especially made an effort to show the children how much I loved her by being physically demonstrative before them.

We spent a lot of quality time together. I often took Elizabeth to medical meetings with me, and we would spend a few days after the meeting just hanging out and vacationing together. We were fortunate to have grandparents close by who loved to baby sit, so this made it possible for us to spend quality time together quite often. One other thing I did was to always be home for supper (dinner) where we

would have family discussions. I particularly listened to the kids troubles and victories--trying to be encouraging when necessary. Often I would share with them some of the things that happened in my life that related to existential subjects. Elizabeth was an active participant, too. I would go back to the Hospital if I still had work to do after the kids were in bed.

Reading was important to our children so we always read a story before they went to bed. I loved to read "Uncle Remus" to them in dialect. My oldest son loved "Donald Duck's New Toy Train." I read it until I could quote it without looking at the book. Whenever I took a trip to a medical meeting I brought books home for them. Each child got one. Sometimes I brought other gifts for them, especially if they were unique. I often bought Elizabeth presents. Especially at Christmas and at other times. I bought her some very nice presents that demonstrated how much I loved her. I got great satisfaction out of seeing the expression on her face when she opened a present.

Spending time together as a family was done by going on camping trips, and spending time on our boats.



*Our early years.*



Over the years we owned a series of boats ranging from a runabout, to a houseboat, to a cabin cruiser, to a 30-foot sailboat . We could spend the night on most of them, so in the summer we would go to our boat on Friday night and spend Saturday and Sunday on the water. The children generally loved this since as they grew older they could occasionally take a friend. I liked being with my children, and tried to help them like it too.

Another thing that I unconsciously did was to be of one mind with Elizabeth. I tried to always communicate my plans for work and travel, and all our household decisions were made together. We always supported one another in disciplining the children. Our usual question about decisions where they wanted to do something that was out of the ordinary was, “Did you ask your father?” Or, “What did your mother say?” Sometimes we did not agree with our spouse’s decision, but we still supported one another and resolved our differences later.

We did demonstrate our love with non sexual touching. I hugged her and kissed her every day, both alone and before the children. We slept in the same bed most often in close body contact. Sometimes it was only our feet that were touching, but we maintained body contact.

Our sex life was highly satisfying to both of us. We had sex once or twice a week or sometimes more . We did not discuss having children. We both wanted them so we had them about every two years and one month apart. We finally decided that five was enough and quit. We both loved children, and they became the *raison d’être* for our lives. Elizabeth was a super mom who loved her children unconditionally, but guided their steps so that they grew in maturity to be adults of worth. I helped.

Early in our marriage we did not have a spiritual life. I was not a Christian and usually went to the hospital, fishing, or did things around the house on Sunday. Even though Elizabeth had accepted Christ when she was 18 yrs old, she was not a consistent practitioner of her faith. I did, though, want my children to have good character, so before I became a Christian we taught the Christian values and got them involved in scouting.

Both the boys and girls were involved. Our three boys achieved the rank of Eagle, and the girls the equivalent rank in girl scouts. After they got started I tried to participate by being active in their troops. I was, in time,

asked by our local boy scout executive to go on a canoe trip in the Quetico Wilderness in southwestern Ontario. While on that trip I met the Lord and became an authentic Christian (See my book, *The Grace to Grow*).

My whole life was changed. I wanted to go back to church, to read the Bible, and to learn more about my newly acquired faith. My relationship with my wife and children dramatically changed, and serving the Lord became my primary occupation. I did, of course, encourage the children to get involved in the church. They did, and in time all of them asked Christ into their life. We did not force anything on them. Our two oldest boys, Bill and Ben became Christians in Young Life, Karen and Bob at Lay Witness missions, and Tammy at a New Directions Concert. Because my father prayed for me every day of my life I have done the same for my wife and children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren ever since I became a Christian.



**The Wilsons celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary in 2010.**

One of the most important parts of my Christian life is serving the Lord. I was 44 years old when I came to know Him. I did, though, try to serve him while maintaining my academic activities. The Holy Spirit guided me as I integrated my faith into my practice and into my instruction of medical students and residents. Elizabeth was involved in this effort since we would sometimes house those who came from other schools, and make them feel as if they were part of our family. They also got a chance to see how a Christian marriage and family operated. We too had a prayer group that met in our home one day a week, and we conducted seminars on elements of Christian psychiatry in our home. She was always the gracious hostess.

Lastly, we exposed our children and ourselves to the Word of God. We had cards called “precious promises” that the children took turns in reading when we had supper. I never believed much in family devotions so they read the card, and one of the children prayed extemporaneously before we ate always giving thanks. Thus they learned to pray in the Spirit early on in their lives. I also began to read the Bible each morning. I read three chapters, and then noted what God said to me as he illuminated the scriptures.

I have now read through the Bible at least 50 times, sometimes reading it through more than twice in a year. I also do topical Bible studies whenever a question arises in my mind. During the last years, I have made up a list of all my children, grandchildren and great grandchildren and all

my former students who I pray for by name each morning. I pray for them the prayer that Paul recorded in Colossians 1:9-14, "For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God." Elizabeth and I have been doing a devotional each morning for the last year and praying together.

I want to add one other thing. My friends, students, people in the community and the church recognized Elizabeth's loving nature. When she was in school two of her male classmates came to me at a school function, and told me that if I died they were going to divorce their wives and marry Elizabeth. Everyone recognizes her loving nature.

Elizabeth says, "I do not have much to add except I did what I wanted to do; I wanted to love my husband and my children. I wanted to raise my children to be God-loving, and to be good citizens. When my husband spent Sunday mornings at the hospital in Texas, I took the children to Sunday School at a local Presbyterian church. Bill's mother and father took the kids to Sunday school and church at a local Methodist church after we moved back to Durham. When Bill became a Christian we all went to Sunday School and church together. I wanted them to know who God was and what role he could play in their lives. I agree with the other things Bill wrote."

I am sure that you can perceive the similarities of my description of our marriage to the book *Five Love Languages* by Gary Chapman. We learned these principles before he wrote his book. Some of it came in our training, some in our experiences in my work, and some of it from the Word of God. I recommend his book for it contains truth.



## Personal Notes

I wish I could say something good about my life these days since I have been in chronic pain for two years. It has finally gotten so it is almost unbearable. Fortunately, I hope to get some relief on Thursday of this week.

Otherwise I have had the Lord lay on me the knowledge that the prayer of church worship services is next to useless. As well, corporate prayer in Christendom is desultory and without power. Nothing happens with the prayers I hear today. In the early church signs and wonders occurred, and people were attracted to see and hear what was occurring. They then heard the gospel and many were saved. We need to have those things happen today, for they would be just as accrediting and people would again come to know the Lord.

Muslims blow themselves up to attract attention, and to accredit themselves to their God. They kill others at the same time because they hope that will also accredit them. We Christians do not have to do that. We can heal their diseases and set people free of demonic possession. We can offer them love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control instead of lies and murder. What a contrast. Pray for prayer warriors who will pray up revival.



I don't know how to start this since I have read so many. I was given a Kindle at Christmas, and since then I have been able to acquire many books -- often very cheap and often free. I have read a bunch of old classics. I even read a novel.

***Revive us Again: the Reawakening of American Fundamentalism:*** by Joel A. Carpenter, Published by Oxford University Press. This book is one of the best and most carefully researched volumes that I have ever read on the subject of the evangelical movement in American Christianity. I cannot say enough about the authors giving credit to experientialism as a vital factor in revival. You have to read the book to really appreciate the authors erudition. It may not be as impressive to those who have been "presbetyrianized," as the author describes them, but for an experientialist it is very confirming. This book is available on Kindle.

***The Fourth Great Awakening*** is written by Rod Pennington and Jeffery Martin, I bought this by mistake and then decided to read it because I was intrigued by the title. It is a book that is like Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*. I would like to say it is New Age, but it is not even though,

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as I read the first chapters, I thought it was. I could not put it down after the third chapter, so it is a first class “what is going to happen next” manuscript. I recommend it to you for light reading. It too is available on Kindle.

***The works of Jonathan Edwards, with a Memoir by Sereno E. Dwight, Revised and Corrected by Edward Hickman*** was first published in 1834. I have to say, the father of American evangelicalism did not do much for me. His excessively intellectual language was not illuminating. Although Presbyterians in this country and in Scotland lauded him, I found there was little in his writing that was illuminating. He did not think much of Armenians, that is for sure. I finally gave up and quit reading after spending three days trying to understand what he was saying. The amazing thing is that very little time was spent in these accounts, of the great revival that occurred in his church and in Northampton, Massachusetts. Unless you are very intellectual don't bother.



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