

Assessing the Common Christian Marriage Counseling Model

When I began this undertaking, my initial thought was, “*The process can’t be that bad, can it?*”

Although my original premise was that my own experiences and the accounts of many of the victims I had worked with were unique, upon further scrutiny, it seems that the popular Christian marriage counseling model is perhaps even more counterproductive and potentially harmful than I had ever contemplated.

While many might agree that my counselor did not handle my particular situation appropriately, the sheer number of accounts of abuse victims with their own shocking stories has prompted me to take a closer look at the common counseling model, identify why it so often fails where abuse is involved, and propose a new model that supports and encourages victims and acknowledges the need to identify abuse and abusers. I realize that these processes are founded upon longstanding principles and priorities that must also be identified and considered in light of their effectiveness - or failure - where abuse has permeated our marriages and homes.

Specifically, when seeking to address even the most serious marital struggles, for many, if not most Christian counselors, the counseling process will generally emphasize...

- **Couples Counseling**, which is intended to provide an opportunity for airing concerns, conflicts and struggles in a safe, neutral environment. This forum is intended to improve...

- **Communication**, where the partners come together to share their frustrations and viewpoints in an effort to help both partners to better understand and practically care for one another. Communication is designed to set the stage for...
- **Compromise**, a middle ground where both partners accept a measure of responsibility for the dysfunction. Compromise is designed to bring about...
- **Cooperation**, a willingness to promote the ongoing, mutual accommodation of each partner's needs and desires. And respectful cooperation is designed to facilitate and restore...
- **Healthy Cohabitation**, where home life is balanced and ensures both partners' happiness.

I realize this overview is an over-simplification, but for purposes of analysis, I am confident it is fairly consistent with common Christian marriage counseling practices and recognizes that a couple entering into marriage counseling is expected to share the same goal: to save the marriage.

On the surface, the outline seems somewhat practical. The process outlined above is generally designed to invoke in both marriage partners a foundational, practical understanding of what a healthy marriage looks like, an identification of sources of conflict and the unhealthy responses to such conflicts coupled with the voluntary, mutual commitment of both partners to learn how to better and more lovingly meet the needs and desires of one another going forward. The approach seems logical on its surface,

but in many, if not most, cases, that process will be highly ineffective when there is an abuser involved.

Perhaps this process is productive in situations where the marital differences are related to finances, logistics, minor vices, priorities or lifestyle, but where abuse is involved, this process is completely backwards, irrational, and even potentially dangerous.

The core problem with this model is that the focus is not centered on the truthful condition of the relationship, the character of the people in it, or the legitimate needs or desires of those who are being abused, but rather the focus is centered on a singular predetermined outcome that by necessity must employ specific strategies that are designed to accomplish that outcome regardless of the potential negative impacts on those who may benefit and those who may be harmed in the process.

In order to identify the reasons that Christian counseling fails where abuse is present, it is vital to see marriage for what it should be in an accurate biblical context and acknowledge that abuse should never be accommodated in God's sacred institution.

The reader must bear in mind that entire textbooks have been written to validate and facilitate the present counseling process, so revealing its weaknesses is not as simple as I had originally imagined. The importance of this examination, however, cannot be understated, for just as a poor foundation finds the Tower of Pisa leaning precariously off-center, so too will be the result when the foundation of the marriage counseling process is similarly skewed...