

Book Reviews 9.27.09

25 Surprising Marriages, by William J. Petersen, Timothy Press, 1997, 2006 rpt.

This book, subtitled *How Great Christians Struggled to Make Their Marriages Work*, is one that my brother describes as being helpful for its cumulative effect rather than any one of the particular biographies it sketches for you.

In style, the book is very readable and is written for the general public. It is a collection of short biographies of 25 well-known Christians, focusing particularly on their marriages. At least, that is the stated objective of the book.

Some of the chapters contain very little information about the couple they are describing. I attribute this to the fact that in these cases there is likely very little known concerning the wife of the individual. For example, this is most evident in the sketch of John Bunyan, the author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, especially his first marriage. No one even knows the name of his first wife (although our author gives her one).

Several of the marriages highlighted in the book were exceedingly bad marriages. In one case, it is surprising that the couple is included at all. That would be Hannah Whittall Smith and her husband Robert Pearsall Smith. Hannah was a universalist – that means she believed that everyone would be saved. As such, it seems odd that she should be included as a “Great Christian”. She wrote a book called *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life*, but the book is a very bad book giving a distorted view of the Christian walk and the marriage of the Smith's was anything but happy.

Nevertheless, it is true that there have been good and bad marriages among men and women who have been looked up to as great Christian leaders. It is instructive to us to look at them and to think of them as examples of marriages and married life.

If you have read any biographies of any of the individuals listed in the book, you will be a bit disappointed about the sketchiness of the stories. But as beginning looks, they are interesting, and as a collection with a focus on the marriages, I think they are helpful.

Occasionally the author will include a few quotations or summaries from the work of his subjects on the subject of marriage. Some of these are quite insightful. They will be noted below.

However, as I said, it is the cumulative effect that is most helpful. Let me sum up what I think you should take away from a reading of this book:

1. Every marriage is different – both women and men come to marriages with differing gifts, interests, and abilities.
2. Successful marriages manage to blend the strengths of the individuals into a working partnership.
3. Successful marriages overlook the faults of the spouses because of the *value* of the working partnership.
4. The most successful marriages follow God's divinely revealed pattern in the Bible by both partners putting their energy into the husband's calling from God. The wife enables her husband's success while often having her own distinct style, personality, ministry, and activity for God as well.

This does not look the same in every marriage, because every marriage is different.

Partnership is the main theme of this book. Without a full partnership, the problems of marriage are too much. The couples that succeed are the couples that fully commit themselves to one another, regardless of similarity or differences.

A marriage partnership doesn't mean that the wife moulds the husband into her image of what he should be or vice versa. What it means is that each individual takes what the other offers and works harmoniously with what has been given, denying self, in order to achieve a greater end.

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A few thoughts on marriage from the pages of this book:

From Catherine Booth, aggressive woman preacher, wife of William Booth:

Four Rules of Married Life, p. 79

1. Never to have any secrets from my husband
2. Never to have two purses

3. Talk out differences of opinion to secure harmony and don't pretend differences don't exist
4. Never to argue in front of the children

From Martin Luther, his views of marriage, pp. 163-164.

“To get a wife is easy enough, but to love her with constancy is difficult ... for the mere union of the flesh is not sufficient; there must be congeniality of tastes and character. And that congeniality does not come overnight.”

“Some marriages were motivated by mere lust but mere lust is felt even by fleas and lice. Love begins when we wish to serve others.”

“Of course, the Christian should love his wife. He is supposed to love his neighbour, and since his wife is his nearest neighbour, she should be his deepest love. And she should also be his dearest friend.”

“Nothing is more sweet than harmony in marriage, and nothing more distressing than dissension.”

From George Muller:

How Love Grows: by praying and working together, p. 245

1. Both of us, by God's grace, had one object in life, and only one, to live for Christ
2. We had the blessing of having an abundance of work to do ... By God's grace we gave ourselves to it; and this abundance of work greatly tended to the increase of our happiness. ... Our mornings never began with the uncertainty of how to spend the day, or what to do.
3. [As busy as we were, we] never allowed this to interfere with the care of our souls. Before we went to work, we had, as an habitual practice, our seasons for prayer and reading the Holy Scriptures.
4. Lastly, and most of all to be noticed, is this: we had for many years, whether twenty or thirty years of more I do not know, besides our seasons for private prayer and family prayer, also habitually our seasons for praying together.

Muller's advice on finding a spouse, p. 247

1. Much waiting on God
2. A hearty purpose to be willing to be guided by Him
3. True godliness without a shadow of a doubt ... should be the first and absolutely most needful qualification
4. Suitableness. An educated man should not marry an uneducated woman or vice versa.

From William Carey, p. 319:

Qualifications for missionaries: “It is absolutely necessary for the wives of missionaries to be as hearty in the work as their husbands.”

*Will Medicine Stop the Pain?*, by Elyse Fitzpatrick and Laura Hendrickson, Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2006.

This book, subtitled *Finding God's healing for depression, anxiety, & other troubling emotions*, is written by two women who are certified by NANC, the National Association of Nouthetic Counselors. This is the organization whose philosophy and literature we tend to recommend and attempt to follow in the area of counseling. It is opposed to integrating secular psychology with the Bible in counseling.

Elyse Fitzpatrick is a counselor of women and a writer of numerous books on counseling, one of which our ladies have studied, *Idols of the Heart*.

Laura Hendrickson is a medical doctor who formerly practiced psychiatry but is now a Biblical counselor. She struggled with depression herself, but found peace in Christ. She had a brother who also struggled with depression, but ended his own life because he would not turn to God.

The book is very helpful and one I would highly recommend to anyone, although I should mention one 'caveat' at the start. This book is written by women for women... some guys might find that a bit disconcerting. I would advise our men to read this book anyway for the following reasons:

- You will be helped in understanding some things your wife might experience because she is a woman.
- Men can experience many of the same emotional/psychological problems as women. The approach of this book is biblical, the science of the book is universally applicable, and the philosophy of this book is one that both men and women need to adopt.
- And finally: You're a man, you can take it.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part is designed to help the reader understand what is going on when someone is suffering from 'inner pain' that is sometimes called depression or anxiety, or some other equally disturbing problems related to the inner man. This part has four chapters.

The first two chapters are excellent. In chapter 1, the authors address the question, "What's wrong with me?" There is a huge debate in the world of counseling about what exactly is wrong when people experience inner turmoil.

Materialists believe that people are just chemical compounds and all problems are related to the physical body. If your feelings are bad, something is wrong with your body in some way. It is probably a 'brain problem' since the brain is the organ with which we think.

The Bible teaches that people are body and soul. It attributes many problems of inner turmoil to problems in the spirit. If your feelings are bad, they are often products of 'thought-habits' — ways you have gotten used to thinking, attitudes you have been in the habit of keeping, unbiblical desires you have delighted in fulfilling, and so on. It is possible that someone may cope with difficult outward circumstances for some time, but suddenly, 'out of the blue', find that years of faulty thinking produces overwhelming feelings of depression, anxiety, or other mental and spiritual turmoil that seem utterly defeating.

This chapter does a good job of proving Biblically that the inner man (the soul, the spirit, the heart) is responsible for much of how you feel. It is true that the body can affect your feelings, or even make your feelings worse. But if you try to deal with your feelings without dealing with your heart, you will fail in trying to overcome inner turmoil.

The second chapter addresses the question, "Will Medicine Help my Pain?" The chapter shows how psychiatric medicines work and discusses some serious problems with their use. The major problems of these medications are: "Poop Out", Tail Chasing, and Dependence. "Poop Out" means that the effect of medications can and often do wear off – they lose their effectiveness. "Tail Chasing" means that sometimes side effects are mistaken for new problems and new drugs are prescribed with new side effects which then call for still newer drugs with other side effects and on and on it goes. "Dependence" means that individuals can become so dependent on the drugs they are taking that they have a hard time getting off them or reducing dosage.

In spite of these dangers, the authors of this book are not against all use of psychiatric medicine. However, they are very cautious about its use and recommend dealing with heart issues first. They offer hope that the heart can change if we are faithful to follow Biblical guidelines for thinking and behaving.

The third and fourth chapters are intended to address the problem of suffering in a more general way. These chapters do offer some benefit in understanding suffering, but there is a problem with the underlying theology of the authors which seems to this reviewer to be at times 'cold comfort' for someone in suffering. The concept that God's primary objective in creation is getting more glory for himself is faulty. At best, it is poorly expressed and at worst, it diminishes the great attractiveness of a loving God who completely deals with human sin and its consequences without regard to any cost to Himself. This objection is relatively minor for the value of the book as a whole and should not put off anyone from reading the book.

In Part Two, the authors address four areas of inner turmoil more specifically and then conclude with a chapter directing the individual to learn to live and think for the glory of God. This section of the book is very helpful.

The four subjects addressed are:

1. Depression
2. Anxiety
3. Out-of-Control Moods
4. Cognitive-Perceptual Problems (Dementia, Schizophrenia, Psychosis, Head Injury, etc.)

Physical problems may be especially evident in the area of Cognitive-Perceptual problems. Physical problems can be related to the other areas as well. However, one thing that we must learn is that regardless of our physical problems, we are each individually responsible for our heart attitude and our behavioural responses.

The last chapter of the book deals with how you go about changing heart problems. Whether you have any of the inner turmoil mentioned in this book, this chapter is excellent on teaching how to deal with putting off the old man with its habits and lusts and putting on the new man to walk in the light of the Lord. Everyone can benefit from this chapter alone.

The book deals briefly with each of the subjects it covers. As such, it can't be seen as a comprehensive look at any one of the problems it mentions. However some of its brevity is handled very well by some helpful Appendices to the main book.

The first appendix is a very good, balanced presentation of the Gospel. It is referred to throughout the book. It is the first key to spiritual change. Unless you are born again, you cannot deal successfully with your spiritual struggles.

The second appendix is entitled "Understanding Medicine Dependence, Withdrawal, and Side Effects." Further help about specific types of medicine reinforces some of the statements made earlier in the book.

The third appendix directs you on how to talk to your doctor about any medication you may already be on.

The last appendix provides a bibliography of other helpful books on the specific topics mentioned. The books recommended are all helpful and many will provide more depth for specific problems.

The also book contains many helpful charts and diagrams that illustrate the concepts the authors are discussing. They are very valuable.

One last comment: this book commits the sin of endnotes! Endnotes put information that should be in footnotes at the end of the book. A pox on endnotes! May they be erased from the possibilities in the publisher's arsenal!

Having said that, be sure to check the endnotes. With only one exception, they provide excellent additional help on the points they are supporting.

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"In either case, our feelings aren't dysfunctional or sick. Our feelings are doing just what they were designed by God to do. They're showing us that we have a problem. *To feel better, we need to fix the problem, not just make the pain go away.*" [pp. 31-32]

"When we struggle with emotions, the only sure footing that we can find is in the Scripture. Ultimately it really doesn't matter that our friends are encouraging us or that we've convinced ourselves that we are getting better. What really matters is that God is there, understanding, upholding, protecting, and pitying us." [p. 75]

- "God uses suffering to draw us to Him. ...
- "Through suffering we learn to be more grateful for the suffering of God's perfect Son. ...
- "Suffering is meant, in part, to motivate us to seek to change. ...
- "Our pain works to reveal our own misconceptions and sins and to lead us to repentance and truth. ...
- "Suffering humbles and enables us to comfort others who are suffering. ..." [pp. 110-111]

"Maybe you want to please God, but when it comes down to choosing between your convenience and God's commands, you find that you don't want to obey God badly enough to say no to your own desires. Or maybe your real goal is to become a nicer person so people will like you rather than to become more holy. If your desire is focused on you rather than God, then you will feel ashamed of your failure (*What will people think?*) rather than sorry before God for your sin. If you respond with shame rather than repentance, you will be tempted to despair over your failure rather than being strengthened in your resolve to please God the next time around." [p. 158]

"Unlike the 'five easy steps' and 'magic cures' that the media bombards us with every day, the Bible teaches us that sanctification is a lifelong process that involves setting aside the old self and putting on the new." [p. 187]