

## *Stages of Marriage by Chris Garner*

### *A New Discovery*

I have studied, read and written about marriage for the past 20 years and although I continue to learn more, I don't often discover an amazing new thought or revelation about the marriage relationship. BUT. Some time ago, I read a little book, *The Couple's Journey: Intimacy as a Path to Wholeness*, by Susan Campbell and found what seemed to be radical new ideas about marriage. Interestingly, almost immediately after reading Campbell's book, I encountered two other sources relating the same concepts. These were not new thoughts! Campbell's book was published in 1985, yet I had never encountered such ideas about how couples transition through life together. Why haven't Christian writers and marriage "experts" written and taught these concepts? In 30 years of Christian walk I had not come across this information about the stages of marriage and learned Biblical principles regarding marriage from non-Christians.

Traditionally, we have been taught that the stages of marriage revolve around children; Stage 1: *Newly Married*, Stage 2: *Full Nest*, Stage 3: *Full Nest 2*, Stage 4: *Empty Nest*. Some models present 5 stages, others only take into account the chronological time a couple has been married; *Newly Married*, *Middle Years* and *Later Years*. The problem that I have with these "traditional" stages of marriage is that they do not reflect Biblical principles, nor do they necessarily reflect where couples are in their relationships. These stages reflect the time frame or season a couple may be in, but do not describe the relationship of the couple.

At issue is the fact that the "traditional" stages are not sufficient to help couples work through problems in their relationship and don't address the issues they face. For instance a couple in the "full nest" stage might have intimacy problems. Two or three pre-adolescent children in the house definitely affects a couple's intimacy, but one has to ask why many other couples in this "stage" experience intimacy and don't have the same problems? There is more to the situation and while "full nest" may describe *where* the couple is in their life together, it does not describe *what* is going on between them as a couple. This is why I found Campbell's description of marital stages so riveting and profound. With this new-found information I could look back at my own marriage and see what had happened in our marriage that affected our relationship so dramatically. Reading about Campbell's 5 stages of marriage and then discovering Michelle Weiner-Davis' Marriage Map and Rita DeMaria and Sari Harrar's 7 Stages of Marriage transformed my ideas about my own marriage, how I view marriage in general, and how I can better help couples work through problems in their relationships.

The following description of the 5 stages of marriage is derived from Campbell, Weiner-Davis and DeMaria and Harrar's work in this area. Their works do not mention God or Biblical principles, but I believe the concepts are *very* Biblical.

## *The 5 Stages of Marriage*

There are a variety of ideas about the stages of marriage. As I studied the stages proposed by Campbell, Weiner-Davis, DeMaria and Harrar and others, I kept two foundational principles in mind; one, how does this fit into God's design for marriage and two, what does it mean practically? With this in mind, I would like to propose 5 stages of marriage based on the work of the authors above: Enchantment, Realization, Acceptance, Commitment and Co-creation.



**Enchantment:** This is the new love or “honeymoon” stage a couple experiences when they first get to know each other, continuing into the first, possibly two years of marriage. They have the *we're going to live happily ever after* feeling many couples believe will last for life. Couples are drawn to each other by their differences in this stage and they are *enchanted* with each other; feelings of love, even euphoria, characterize the emotions felt by both people. They believe that they are very much alike; similar hobbies, music, likes, dislikes. They can talk to each other all night long and still function the next day at work. They dream together and look forward to a wonderful future together.

We see the expression of this stage several places in the Bible; David and Michal early in their relationship and Jacob and Rachel and the love they had for each other. The Song of Solomon reflects the enchantment of the Shulammitte woman and Solomon as they expressed their love, their passion for each other. There is an argument if God had not built the blind love of this stage into humans, the race wouldn't survive; that without this blind love, men and women would never remain together long to nurture children.

All couples grow out of this stage in their relationships, but the trouble is that too many believe *this* is true love. They want to keep these feelings love going and when the feelings don't continue, they think something is wrong with their relationship. Passion and romance can and should be a part of a couple's relationship for life, but it will not be the same as the “honeymoon” period of the relationship. Some are even addicted to these “feelings” of love and move from relationship to relationship hoping to keep the feelings alive. Remembering this stage fondly is a good thing; clinging to the euphoric feelings is not good. Moving toward oneness requires that couples continue to grow in their journey together.



**Realization:** The couple realizes that they are, in fact, very different and the euphoric *feelings* of love wear off. It is a time of disenchantment; realizing that life with this person is not going to be what one thought it would be. Some couples never get past this stage, others may move through it quickly with little disruption in their relationship. Typically, disappointment, power struggles, and conflict characterize this stage of the marriage relationship. Husbands and wives both discover that the person they have married does things differently than they do. There may be arguments about involvement of friends or family, spending and finances, making decisions, marital roles, celebrating holidays, cooking, cleaning, sleep times, even the direction of the toilet paper or how to squeeze the toothpaste. One or both spouses may wonder who they've married as they discover the bad (or different) habits the other has and differences aren't cute any longer, they are annoying. Research demonstrates that couples married 5 years or less

experience a significant rate of divorce, indicative of the fact that many couples do not make it out of this stage.

It seems that David and Michal never made it past this stage of marriage as seen by her disdain for her husband when he “danced before the Lord” (2 Samuel 6:16-23). Many people enter marriage too quickly without knowing their future spouses or “counting the cost” of what would be required of them by entering into this covenant relationship (Luke 14). Some enter marriage expecting the other person to change or give up unhealthy behavior and when that person doesn’t change, the ensuing problems can lead to serious marital problems. Healthy boundaries are critical for working through this stage of marriage and couples must be on guard against the disunity and emotional separation that can occur during this time. Christian counseling will help the couple unable work through the issues they experience, *if* they will seek the help.



**Acceptance:** At this stage, each accepts his or herself and his or her spouse for who they are. Couples in a healthy relationship begin working together to work through the problems they face in life. Unhealthy couples may appear to work through the realization stage, but in reality, one or the other has given up and disengaged from the relationship. Those who reach acceptance learn that they can achieve oneness without losing their own identity; that their spouses do not have to become just like them. They are better able to work through their differences and cooperate with each other; using their differences to better manage their world; parenting, finances, careers, spirituality, and families. The relationship begins to stabilize at this point and couples resolve conflict easier and faster. Couples accepting each other have grown through the struggles of the realization stage and now can work together as a team.

Jesus stated in Matthew 22:37-40 that the second greatest commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself. The “expert in the law” asked who his neighbor was and Jesus answered with the parable of the “Good Samaritan” and pointed out that showing mercy is indicative of a “neighbor.” Realize that Jesus used a *Samaritan*, one who was very different from the Jews and rejected by them in his example. Loving one’s spouse (his or her closest neighbor) as himself is to accept both self and spouse. Extending grace and mercy to one’s spouse is an important aspect of this stage. Another Scripture key to this stage is 1 Corinthians 11:11-12, where Paul writes that; “In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.” Husband and wife are interdependent, they need each other and are meant to work together as a team. It is critical that a couple reach this stage in their relationship to become all they can be in their marriage and in service to the Lord.

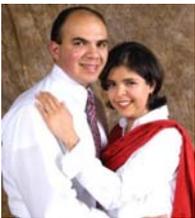


**Commitment:** This stage is characterized by understanding, peace and harmony. No, it is not some sort of marriage *nirvana*, where the couple sits blissfully in their rocking chairs enjoying life together. There may be chaos and trouble in their lives, but they are past the point of allowing trouble to seriously affect their relationship; their oneness and teamwork help them work through the problems they will face *together*. Couples in this stage now know the faults and shortcomings of their spouses, but choose commitment because they also know the strengths and positive attributes of their spouses. They have a history together and are

committed to remaining together for life in spite of their differences. They also appreciate their differences and have experienced how their differences compliment and strengthen each other and their relationship.

It is unfortunate that many couples do not reach this stage until late in life, if at all. After 40 or 50 years of marriage and persevering through many trials together, they may finally get to a point of knowing each other so well that they can live in contentment with each other. Perhaps, it is just reaching a point of resignation; 'it won't get any better than this, so I might as well live out my days with person.' This is not the commitment stage, it is a late life acceptance of the other person and not a healthy acceptance at that. The commitment stage means that a couple experiences the oneness and togetherness meant to occur when God brought the woman to the man. Of course they will not experience this perfectly, but they are now committed to a future together and are more creative in solving the problems and situations they experience.

God said in Genesis 2:18, God said, "It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a suitable helper for him." Couples in the commitment stage understand that this means that they are to work together as a team to fulfill their life purpose of glorifying God. Ecclesiastes 4:9 continues this thought saying, "Two are better than one," again pointing to the need for couples to work together to meet the challenges they will face. Healthy couples in the commitment stage meet challenges together and sometimes it seems that they think alike as they begin to experience oneness. It does not take a certain amount of time to reach this stage; mature couples can enter the commitment stage within a few years of the wedding day. In fact, this is preferable. Couples committed and secure in their relationships will reflect the nature of God and be a testimony of the Lord's work in their lives and marriage.



**Co-creation:** Couples reaching this stage now look outside their relationship, extending their oneness and unity to others; there is shared creative work. Susan Campbell is the only writer I've encountered who has suggested this stage of marriage yet, we see that God created mankind in His image (Genesis 1:27), told them to be fruitful and fill the earth (Genesis 1:28) and of all of His creation, only gave humans imagination and the power to create. Yes, animals procreate and humans don't have to reach this stage before bringing children into the world, but it is not out of oneness and God's plan to create Godly offspring according to Malachi 2:15. Couples in this stage are producing together.

Priscilla and Aquila are a Biblical example of this stage in marriage. They traveled together, spreading the Gospel and working with Paul. Together, they instructed Apollos and helped him better understand the Gospel. Billy and Ruth Graham also come to mind when considering couples co-creating. Known throughout the world as a preacher of the Gospel, Billy said of his wife of more than 60 years; "Ruth was my life partner, and we were called by God as a team. No one else could have borne the load that she carried. She was a vital and integral part of our ministry, and my work through the years would have been impossible without her encouragement and support." Billy was considered the evangelist, but he said that without his wife, there would have been no ministry.

The marriage relationship is an image of the very nature of God and is designed to reflect his creativeness. In this stage, the couple works together not only to meet the challenges they face, but also to reach out to a hurting world. They may work directly together like Priscilla and Aquila or indirectly

like Billy and Ruther Graham, but their accomplishments are a product of the oneness and creativity of their relationship. What a privilege to be used by God in peoples lives and there is enormous satisfaction in of being used together as husband and wife. Couples in this stage must be careful to take care of themselves and their own relationship. Some unwittingly become so busy helping and caring for others, they allow their own relationship to fade. Couples must continue to take the time and invest in their marriage relationship, it is a life-long work throughout the stages of marriage.

### ***What Does this Mean to My Marriage?***

This depends where you are in your marriage. If you are in the Co-creation stage, working together as a team and being used by God in the lives of others, this article may put into words what you have known for many years. Perhaps you can use the information to help another couple struggling. The hope also is that this article will open the eyes of couples preparing for marriage so they will be better prepared for marriage and will understand that the Co-creation stage is their goal and does not have to take a life-time to achieve. For those couples between pre-marrieds and those in the Co-creation stage, my prayer is that this information will help you to understand where you are at in your marriage and challenge you to grow in your relationship toward Co-creation and to seek help if you are stuck.

Marriage reflects God's nature, couples are meant to be in relationship, unity and oneness as seen in the relationship of God the Father and God the Son. Oneness, being naked and unashamed with each other *is* God's plan for married couples. Couples do not move through the stages of marriage towards oneness naturally. It requires work and an investment in the relationship. Knowing the stages of marriage helps couples understand where they are, and with that understanding, they can take steps to move along in the stages. It requires understanding your spouse; making the effort to understand where your spouse has come from and who he or she is a person. There are many resources available to gain this understanding. You can go to marriage seminars, small groups or plug in to several other couples for a couples study. It may mean that you go for counseling to help work through the problems holding you back from growing in your relationship. The main point is that you must do something.

### ***What Are You Going to Do?***

What stage is *your* marriage in? Take an honest look at your marriage relationship and determine which of the 5 Stages of Marriage you are in. Is it Enchantment? Realization? Acceptance? Commitment? Co-creation? Do you accept your spouse for who he or she is? Do you know and understand your spouse? Are you working together as a team?

We need to ask ourselves and our spouses these questions on a regular basis. Society and the culture today tends to drives couples apart, they must work hard to remain connected and continue to grow in their relationship. Are you growing together? Spiritually? Emotionally? Intellectually? Seek to move toward the Co-creation stage so that you might be effective in whatever ministry God has for you, individually or as a couple.