Discerning of God's Will

Mate selection quite clearly includes an incredible mixture of conscious and unconscious factors. In terms of biblical faith, we believe that God is at work in this process as well. Marriage is pivotal to the psychological well-being of individuals, the social well-being of family life, the economic well-being of communities and the well-being of society itself. Therefore, taking marriage seriously means the Christian will also want to discern God's will.

Three guidelines are helpful in seeking God's direction about marriage. First, seek God's will directly through prayer, biblical truth and reflection as a couple. Second, seek premarital counseling. David Olson's "PREPARE/ENRICH" (Olson & Olson, 1999) inventory identifies couple strengths and weaknesses; the relationship areas of personality differences, family of origin dynamics, communication and conflict patterns; and compatibility in terms of finances, parenting, sexual, social and couple expectations. It has proven to be 80-85% accurate in predicting couples that eventually divorce (Fowers, Montel & Olson, 1996). Third, seek affirmation from your family, friends and faith community. Those who know your strengths and weaknesses can give honest feedback and wisdom that will be invaluable to you.

Discerning the will of God can be likened to bringing a boat safely into harbor in the dead of the night. When the captain was asked how he knew where to enter, he explained about the three guiding lights into the harbor. "When they are all lined up in a row, I confidently sail right in!" When the couple's spiritual and personal discernment line up with premarital counseling factors and with affirmation by family, friends and faith community, the couple can proceed with assurance.

Differentiated Unity

Weaving two lives together into a threepoid cord with Christ at the center is the ultimate goal of differentiated unity:

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep each other warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken. (Eccles 4:9-12)

Spouses offer themselves to each other to form a sacred union that is not easily broken when grounded in biblical faith. Through mutual support and empowerment they discover the delicate balance between separateness and togetherness. Equal partnership is pivotal to harmonious interdependence. It's impossible to achieve this goal without sufficient personal differentiation.

In a trinitarian model of marriage, differentiated unity is not only warranted by a theological interpretation of Genesis, but also by the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus in particular. Here are a few of the many proclamations by Jesus that aptly point to the differentiated unity of the Godhead:

"You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also." (Jn 8:19)

"The Father and I are one." (Jn 10:30)

"But if I do [the works of my Father], even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father." (Jn 10:38)
“Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me.” (Jn 12:44–45)

“If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” (Jn 14:7)

“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?” (Jn 14:9–10).

Jesus likewise points to the believer’s relationship with God as a differentiated unity. He prays “that they may be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us” (Jn 17:21). Unlike salvation in eastern mysticism, the human self continues to exist as a differentiated self.

Differentiation describes a person who has a clear sense of self and the maturity to form an effective interdependent relationship. Paradoxically, the more spouses know themselves as distinctly different, the greater their capacity for intimate connection. Sometimes described as “self in relation,” differentiation is to be distinguished from independence (which implies one does not need to depend on others) or over-dependence (which implies one is fused with others).

**A Self in Relation**

Being a self in relation is a key concept in the trinitarian model of marriage. Uniquely created by God, each spouse is an individual in his or her own right who is accountable to God. The Holy Spirit indwells each spouse, empowering each to develop a character and meaning that is unique to him or her. Created to be in relationship, two unique spouses form an interdependent union in which they also develop meaning as a couple.

In order to be sufficiently differentiated, one must have a clearly defined “self.” Becoming a differentiated self is a lifelong process that occurs in the context of our most intimate relationships. In marriage each spouse brings their personal resources into the union to work together for the good of the whole. In her book *An Unfinished Marriage*, Joan Anderson (2002) puts it this way: “It’s through trial and error, yielding and resisting, retracing and reinventing, dependence and interdepen-

dence we assemble our lives together. Love’s deep realization is in the growing, struggling, longing and reaching toward what is possible and living fully in the here and now” (p. 138).

**Differentiated in Christ**

When we use the idea of being differentiated in Christ, we mean that each spouse centers his or her life in Christ and attempts to live according to biblical truth. Therefore, our actions are determined by obedience to Christ rather than defined by culture, family or even one’s spouse. We are accountable to God for our actions and strive to live according to God’s word to the best of our ability. Being ever aware of our human proneness to sin, we acknowledge our dependence on God alone to accomplish this. We are a work in process, eagerly looking for God to grow us into maturity as a Christian husband or wife. Lewis Smedes, in his book *Love Within Limits* (1978), makes the following observation on the statement in 1 Corinthians 13:4 that love is not jealous:

Jealousy becomes the more cruel the more intense are the expectations of eros and the threats to its fulfillment. If we have nothing else in the world to live for but our lover, we are vulnerable to the worst fits of jealousy.

The person who tells someone else, “I can’t live without you,” is threatened at his deepest selfhood when the one with whom he cannot live without has to be shared in the smallest way. Such a person always suspects the worst, and this very suspicion prods him to cruel reaction.

Agapic love is the power to diminish the pain of jealousy because it keeps us from expecting too much from another finite person. Agape does not let us give our souls to idols, not even to the idol of the ideal husband or wife or friend. Agape keeps eros from expecting everything in this life. So agape will not let us be so deeply threatened that our very existence seems at stake. (p. 26)

Being dependent on Christ alleviates an overdemanding concentration on the spouse to meet our needs. Colossians 3:2-3 reminds us, “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” In a spiritual sense, we surrender our will to the will of God when Christ is the center. Being a child of God is our core identity and therefore we em-
brace the notion that “he must increase, but I must decrease” (Jn 3:30). Being differentiated in Christ means we are focused on God's validation and less focused on our spouse's validation.

**God Validation**

Our validation is gauged in terms of pleasing God rather than pleasing self or spouse. It's easy to lose perspective when our validation is centered on our spouse rather than God. When we are overly invested in spousal validation we become entrapped and reactive to their responses. When we are so externally focused on spousal approval we have less ability to make room for them internally. In contrast, when both spouses are ultimately invested in what God wants for their relationship, they are more open to their spouses as well.

It's not that we take self completely out of the formula! In 1 John 4:7-21 we read that we are to love others because God first loved us. Without an awareness of self it is virtually impossible to give up the self for the sake of others. Being differentiated in Christ means each spouse holds on to convictions they believe are right according to the Bible. We are willing to challenge each other about things that are contrary to God's best for the relationship. It requires a strong, healthy self to stand up as well as give up self for differentiated unity. Being differentiated in Christ keeps us dependent on God to live out covenant love, grace, empowerment and intimacy in marriage. Once we are no longer enslaved by self-focus or other-focus, we are able to be God- and relationship-focused.

The couple has the greatest potential for achieving spiritual and relational unity when both spouses are centered in Christ. The highest goal of mutual covenant is to draw upon God's spirit for relationship strength. During inevitable struggles spouses ask God to calm their fears, to keep them from defensive reactivity and to keep them persistent in their mutual covenant commitment. Being anchored in Christ means they can tolerate personal anxiety in order to stay connected during conflicts. Spouses seek the help of the Holy Spirit to resist self-centered tendencies in order to achieve mutually satisfying outcomes. Differentiated spouses listen wholeheartedly to each other's unique perspective by setting aside personal agendas. Honest self-disclosure brings vitality, and collabora-

tion brings hope. Differentiated unity is the culmination of two authenticated differentiated selves becoming one. Grounded in Christ, harmony is a reward that passes human understanding.

**Family of Origin Differentiation**

Murray Bowen emphasized that every person needs to be emotionally differentiated from one’s parents so he or she can maintain a healthy balance of individuality (separateness) and togetherness (connectedness) in marriage (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). In fact, this tension of individuality and togetherness is an ongoing critical task throughout each stage of marriage. Interdependency is accomplished by acknowledging individual perspectives while remaining emotionally connected as the couple forms a united stance.

Each family, in a sense, hopes their son or daughter will ensure that their family traditions are carried on. Parents may even become rivals over whether their children will carry on the important family, cultural and religious values they have ingrained in them. It is natural that parents are invested in having their legacy passed down through the next generations. It becomes a matter of family loyalty! For example, Swedish parents may accuse their adult son of disloyalty when he marries an Italian woman who serves a pasta dinner instead of the traditional smorgasbord for Christmas. The challenge for the couple is to differentiate from their family of origin in such a way that they blend the best of both cultures into their unique union, while adding their own touches along the way.

During stress in their relationship, it is typical for spouses to revert back to the familiar ways of their family of origin. Spouses simply repeat what worked for them as a child, whether it was to withdraw, manipulate, pout, scream or control. Understanding family of origin dynamics will help spouses see how they bring less than perfect childhoods into the marriage. Whether our childhood experiences are positive or negative, it's crucial that spouses understand their origins. Marriage can either be a source of healing for childhood wounds or a place of rewounding. By telling our childhood stories, our spouse is able to enter the other's world of hurts and confusion, and it becomes an opportunity for healing and differentiation.
After several years of marriage, Regina finally broke down after an unsuccessful attempt at sexual intercourse. She began to tell Chris about the abuse she had suffered as a child. Would he blame her for her uncle’s action? Would he think less of her? Would he reject her or find her undesirable now? These fears ran through her mind, but she reminded herself that Chris had proven over and over his unfailing love. She risked divulging her secrets through agonizing tears. Chris was angry about what had happened to his beloved wife, but kept his feelings to a minimum so he could listen to her story of horror. He never loved her more. Utmost in his mind was how to support her through this deep pain in her soul. In this moment, Chris held on to himself (differentiation) in a way that promoted healing. Over time, Regina found release from the shackles of the past trauma in the safety of Chris’s love and acceptance. His ability to stay differentiated and not be emotionally reactive made room for her to grow in personal differentiation. This, in turn, deepened the trust and intimacy and increased the sexual and emotional satisfaction in their marriage.

God can use the marriage relationship as a tremendous healing force. No earthly relationship has more potential for transformation than marriage. When we are sufficiently differentiated, we can be a comforting presence in the midst of past wounds. An undifferentiated husband may have lost the opportunity to serve as an agent of healing by giving in to his feelings of rage. That would surely distance him from his wife who needed to feel safe to tell her story. In this case Chris provided a safe environment by being fully present to her in the moment. This enabled Regina to open up her heart without hesitation.

**Levels of Spousal Differentiation**

Behind the “two are better than one” Scripture is the idea that two independent persons have unique strengths to offer each other and the relationship. Humanly speaking, when two people are overly dependent on each other, they fail to develop aspects of themselves. Settling for dependency, one fails to grow. Of course, temporary dependency is another matter altogether. There are times when dependency is necessary due to unique circumstances. But generally, it balances out over a lifetime.

The level of spousal differentiation has an impact on the quality of the marriage. High levels of individual differentiation result in high marital differentiated unity. Likewise, low levels of individual differentiation will result in low levels of marital quality.

As illustrated in table 8.1, level of self-differentiation is represented on a curvilinear continuum ranging from low at the left, high in the middle, to low at the right. This means that low self-differentiation comes in two types: at the extreme left is the disengaged self with an independent relationship style. This person has a protected self that disconnects from others. Closed boundaries result in a fortified self. Due to low ego strength, this person is self-centered and relies upon narcissistic validation. In its extreme form this person presents in a self-confident way that borders on cockiness. In reality this is a misleading portrayal since underneath the person is actually insecure.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Self-Differentiation</th>
<th>Style of Relating</th>
<th>Boundaries</th>
<th>Source of Validation</th>
<th>Ego Strength</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LOW</td>
<td>HIGH</td>
<td>LOW</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disengaged Self</td>
<td>Congruent Self</td>
<td>Strong, yet Permeable</td>
<td>God/Self Validation</td>
<td>Selfish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Interdependent</td>
<td>Weak or Nonexistent</td>
<td>Other Validation</td>
<td>Unselfish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Selfless</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Represented on the extreme right in the continuum is the *enmeshed* self with a dependent relationship style. Such persons have a fragile self that gains validation through the opinions others have of them. They become dependent on others for definition and therefore their boundaries are wide open. This person readily allows others to invade their space. Low ego strength shows itself in selfless actions that accommodate others. In exact contrast to the independent attitude, this person has a clinging personality, latching on to others for the ego strength they lack.

The person with a highly differentiated self is represented in the center of table 8.1. This person possesses a *congruent* self and is comfortably assertive and outgoing. He or she has no desire to withdraw from others or any need to fuse with others. This person has an interdependent style of relating, choosing collaborative interaction rather than relying solely on self or others. The self has strong, yet permeable boundaries, allowing for self-care while still being open for engaging others. Drawing upon self-/God-validation, the person with a high degree of differentiation is internally rather than externally validated. Sufficient ego strength allows this person to act unselfishly towards others.

In presenting this chart, we have described stereotypes of polar opposites. Our composite descriptions are obviously over the top, and we contend that most people are actually somewhere in between, working toward the middle. Now we focus on three different types of low-differentiated marriages and then on the well-differentiated congruent marriage.

**The Enmeshed Marriage: A Delusion of Fusion**

Marriages in which both partners have enmeshment tendencies end in spousal fusion. Some hold to the false notion that dependency is ideal, the idea that I need you to be whole. Actually, clinging to a spouse because you aren’t able to stand on your own two feet weakens the relationship. When partners look to each other to complete themselves, the tendency is to hang on to each other for dear life. Depending on the spouse for strength weakens one’s ability to develop personal strength. Rather than growing into two whole persons who contribute to the union, they lean on each other for wholeness. It is tempting to romanticize with comments like “we can’t live without each other.” Yet in reality both spouses in such a relationship are underdeveloped.

Recall, for example, how in our early marriage the human insecurity in Jack and in me kept us overly dependent upon each other. In a social situation for instance, I used my social skills in a way that kept Jack totally dependent upon me. I felt smug about his needing me, but under closer scrutiny we both realized we had created a counterfeit security. Unfortunately, mutual dependency tends to move us to use power over our spouse. Out of the desire to be needed, we keep our spouse dependent rather than helping him or her become competent.

During the courtship dance, lovers take intense delight in losing themselves in each other. It’s quite natural to be completely absorbed in each other’s lives, soaking up the undivided attention during the initial coupling stage. This fantasy fusion does not last long, however, for soon the unique personalities become apparent as one progresses in the relationship. By acknowledging and appreciating their differences, they make room for the unique self of the other as they progress beyond the courtship dance.

In second marriages, persons also enjoy the romantic aspects of getting to know each other. The second adolescent “being in love” charm and candlelight dinners don’t last long before reality sets in, though. Soon the couple gets down to the brass tacks of living together. There are many areas to negotiate, such as finances, children, in-laws, career and household considerations, which very quickly become part of their lives. When both partners have achieved a mature level of differentiation, they can be more forthright about their limitations as well as their strengths. There is less chance they will be overly dependent and fused at this point in their lives.

A good friend of ours who recently married for a second time at the age of sixty told us about the day she met with her intended on the beach. They each had a list of what they wanted the other to know about themselves before they married. Back and forth it went, “I can be a real witch! . . . I’m hard to get along with at times. . . . I have very strong opinions. . . . I’m not ready to give up my career. . . . Our children need to approve. . . . I’m a grouch before I have my cup of coffee in the morning. . . .” They were entering marriage as two strongly defined persons forming a covenant of interdependency.
The Disengaged Marriage: A Misfortunate Misconnection

Marriage between two persons who tend toward disengagement will find intimate connection difficult. In a marriage between disengaged spouses, for example, self-sufficiency keeps them working independently side-by-side rather than toward an interdependency. It should be noted that the disengaged marriage is the norm in some cultures (societies that promote marriage as an institution).

In the case of the disengaged marriage, spouses will need—for the sake of the relationship—to stretch beyond their natural tendencies to be separate. It was normal for Bill to distance himself from any inkling of dependency in his new marriage. He had learned to keep himself removed from his family members and friends most of his life. He was intelligent and successful according to outward standards of success, but when it came to relationships he was superficial. Although he enjoyed the sexual relationship, he did not allow himself to be emotionally vulnerable. He married Sophie, a young woman shy by nature, who had developed a self-sufficient internal life that kept her removed and sometimes aloof in her relationships.

The two didn’t demand much of each other in terms of emotional intimacy, but if they were honest both could admit feeling lonely in their marriage. Neither had very much connection with their family of origin, and there were no models in the family to help them learn how to make significant emotional connection. Due to their dissatisfaction in their relationship they sought help in therapy. Being willing to risk asking more from themselves and each other, they faced their fears about being emotionally close. As they developed safety in their relationship, they could admit distancing maneuvers and could make intentional choices to increase their emotional connection.

The Polarized Marriage: Codependency

Polarized marriage takes place between persons with low levels of differentiation who are at opposite ends of the continuum, that is, the spouse who needs to be cared for marries one who wants to be a caregiver. Thus, spouses who have a tendency toward disengagement and fusion marry each other, forming a codependent relationship. It may appear to be a perfectly complementary union, but due to each spouse’s low level of differentiation things are more complicated than that. The underdeveloped and overdeveloped selves feed off each other in order to feel complete.

Sheila, who wants to be cared for, looks to Steve, the caregiver, to meet all her needs. While confident in the role of caretaker, protector and provider, he is incompetent when it comes to satisfying her emotional dependency needs. These voids leave a huge breach between them. Sheila feels rejected and Steve feels inadequate, weakening their marriage. What they each need is a good dose of differentiation! Sheila must develop skills so she can take care of herself, while Steve needs to develop emotional strengths to fill out his deficits.

There is a certain degree of deception during courtship as both mates put their best foot forward to the extent each can portray a false self that is quite different from the real self. For example, Jose and Juanita presented themselves as self-assured in courtship. Juanita was attracted to Jose because he exuded confidence, while he was impressed with her level of self-sufficiency. Underneath Jose was actually quite insecure and Juanita quite dependent. Each of them was looking to the other to make up for their own weaknesses. You might say they fell in love with the other’s false public self rather than their real self, each hoping to draw strength from the other. After marriage, they were forced to get beyond the external presentation and confront their real selves.

It is an illusion to think that the spouse can make up for one’s weakness. In some codependent marriages it can be very difficult for either spouse to acknowledge his or her weaknesses. So both continue to live the illusion of their false selves, never admitting their polarized positions. A marriage based upon polarized codependency sinks under the strain. Grabbing on to each other for wholeness puts the relationship in an extremely precarious place. Both spouses must build personal strengths and balance their resources as a couple, so they stand firmly on the solid ground of interdependency.

The Congruent Marriage: A Differentiated Unity

In the congruent marriage, our internal and external resources keep us strong in the joys and torrents of married life. Differentiated spouses have the extra reserves and perspective to create a reciprocating inter-
dependency. By being solidly grounded as spouses and as a couple, they confidently keep their relationship on higher ground.

Of course, there is no such thing as two perfectly differentiated persons. Even in the best circumstances of growing up and developing a mature self, differentiation is an ongoing process throughout our lives. God created us to be in a marriage where both spouses are continually transformed and differentiated through the intensity and intimacy of marriage.

Making secure but permeable boundaries is a mark of differentiated unity. Mature spouses show deep regard for each other's personal boundaries without intruding or distancing. They modify behavior as needed to respect personal boundaries and also carefully guard the boundary around their relationship as a couple.

Facing each other for real, in a real-life marriage, means spouses are willing to tackle real issues head on. Their covenant commitment means they solemnly refuse to duck out of their responsibilities of mutual regard when the going gets tough. As disillusionments pop up along the way, they face their struggles and hardships by joining forces to persevere through the thick and thin of marriage. Differentiated spouses seek to be mate-worthy. Each pays attention to the unique needs of his or her spouse, knowing this is the most effective way to make meaningful connection. Being oriented to the “other” expands their possibilities. Below is a summary of what it means to form a differentiated unity in marriage.

**DIFFERENTIATED UNITY**

We have a separate identity in Christ.

We have high regard for self, spouse and the relationship.

We seek God-validation as opposed to self- or spousal-validation.

We express ourselves honestly and directly.

We earnestly listen to and take each other seriously.

We choose interdependency rather than dependency or independency.

Deciding to be the right partner is a sign of differentiation. It takes a great deal of maturity to be a self-giving spouse. Being differentiated in

Christ means we choose to live the exceptional life of selflessness. We practice self-giving love by going the second mile and turning the other cheek. Our character is formed as we are transformed by the Holy Spirit who empowers us to be the spouses God wants us to be.

Actually, marriage can be a sanctifying experience, as we will suggest in chapter fourteen. None of us enters marriage as fully mature persons, but we are challenged to grow in the context of this intense relationship. The ultimate goal is to fit our lives together outwardly and inwardly after God's way. In marriage, God sharpens and matures us as we serve and empower each other into a differentiated unity that brings out the best in each other. Because God has created us for a special purpose as a couple, we take delight in accomplishing that purpose. The incentive is to live for the Lord, to reach our God-given potential and to seek the Lord's will for our life.

Spouses grow by keeping their individual lives and couple relationship strong in Christ. In the next two chapters we offer practical advice on two crucial ways spouses build a differentiated unity through communication and conflict resolution.