Moses was addressing the Israelites in preparation for their entrance into the land God had promised to give to them. It was a crucial turning point in the history of that young nation, and the words of Moses carried tremendous weight since he had led them during the last forty years and would not be going in with them.

As we read in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses recounts the events that led them to this moment in time – the exodus from Egypt, their rebellion, how God had never abandoned them, and how even the soles of their shoes had not worn out (we parents would like to see that one miracle in our day). Part of Moses’ speech also contained instructions as to how the Israelites should behave in that new land, how they should treat one another, how to maintain faith in the God who liberated them.

In chapter 6, Moses recounts the words of the shema, which are still repeated to this day by Jewish people around the world: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!” And now it is as if Moses turns to face all the parents in Israel and tells them of the crucial role they play in the lives of their children: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up” Deuteronomy 6:4-9, NKJV.

Parents are the Disciple-Makers

These momentous words were not spoken to the priests or Levites. They were not spoken for the leaders of the tribes. These words were spoken to the parents who served as disciple-makers to their children. I did a little bit of math recently and learned that there are about 8760 hours in one year (365 days X 24 hours), that children spend approximately 1440 of those hours in school (180 days X 8 hours), and about 156 hours in church (52 days X 3 hours).

If our kids are not in church school, how can we possibly think that 3 hours of church each week can compare to the influence of forty or so hours at school the same week? If we take away the approximately 2920 hours sleeping (an average of eight hours each night), that still leaves approximately 4244 hours. Those 4244 hours represent precious time parents can have with their children as they try to influence them and lead them to have good, strong relationships with God and with others. Using that time for too many extracurricular activities (Little league, music, etc.) or other distractions (TV, internet, etc.) is only interfering with the time we have to spend with them.

The North American Division is in the last stages of developing a parenting resource which will be known as “Help! I’m A Parent: Christian Parenting in the Real World,” that will be released in early 2014. The first set of ten segments will target parenting children from birth to 7 years of age. You may also visit the website at www.helpimaparent.org. We want to encourage you to look at this resource as another tool to help parents disciple their children and help them grow as healthy Christians in this world.
Impertinent Questions

Investigative reporters frequently use carefully crafted questions to uncover hidden secrets. The less scrupulous among them trap their prey with “gotcha” questions, like “Have you stopped beating your wife yet?” If you answer “yes” you’ve just admitted to spousal abuse—whether you’re innocent or not. Answer “no” and you’ve just confirmed their suspicions that you are a wife-beater.

Of course, there is a legitimate place in society for investigating criminal activity and ensuring the justice is served. And in everyday life there is a place for healthy openness and a willingness to self-disclose in ways that deepen relationships and build confidence and trust. But in certain circles, “outing” has become a vicious sport. Any indiscretion or misstep is seized upon to cruelly ridicule and humiliate the unfortunate victim. Sadly, this character assassination has led to suicide among the young.

In an age where transparency about anything and everything is demanded and where any attempt at a cover-up is viewed with scorn and contempt, how shall we avoid being implicated on the horns of a gotcha dilemma? And how can we help the young and inexperienced to sidestep the “them” trap of revealing too much information.

One simple response to a hostile question is to side-step the issue by saying, “Next question” or “If you’ll forgive me for not answering, I’ll forgive you for asking.” This puts the questioner on notice that you consider the question inappropriate and not worthy of an answer.

When a more pointed reproof is necessary, one can assert, “I’ll not dignify your question with a response.” However, though silence is golden when one is assaulted with gotcha questions or caustic accusations, a “no comment” response may be viewed by some as proof that one has something to hide. And when legal counsel appropriately advises one to neither confirm nor deny allegations, that guarded response may pour fuel on the fires of speculation.

Whether you’re in a teaching role, where students ask thorny questions to try to trip you up and undermine your credibility, or you’re talking to a youth group and an intrusive question is raised to embarrass you, it’s important to remember that the way you respond can turn the group against you or win their support.

Treating the questioner with respect is crucial, even when you’ve been disrespected. There’s a real possibility that behind the audacity is a soul that could be touched and trusted.

Tacitly accepting a question that is disingenuous is often the best strategy. In the face of a clumsy put-down that behind the audacity is a soul that could be touched and trusted.

Defending yourself or your idea when you know that you are right may not be a good idea. There’s a real possibility that behind the audacity is a soul that could be touched and trusted.

Caustic Accusations

I’m so glad that you raised that question because I strongly believe that it’s immensely important to be truthful in marriage. That’s what you solemnly promise to do on your wedding day.

There’s no fine-print, exceptions-clause to your vows. Lifelong faithfulness is a matter of integrity and honor.

And that’s all I’m going to say in response to your question. But I will give you a few good reasons for not giving you a direct answer.

• First, I protect my family from adverse attention by not answering questions of a private nature. I do this because of my love and respect for them.

• Second, I could easily answer your question directly, but I choose not to do so because I know that however I answer that first intrusive question, more probing questions will likely follow. This line of questioning fuels indirect speculation and voyeuristic curiosity that benefits no one.

Like most people, I’ve made mistakes of various kinds, but I don’t talk about them because I don’t want the mistakes that I have made to be an excuse for anyone else to do wrong.

I’ve been careful to develop and maintain a good reputation out of self-respect and because I know that my influence can be positive in the lives of others only if they find me credible and trustworthy. Therefore, I try not say anything that could be twisted and distorted to create misunderstandings or false accusations.

Most important, it would dishonor God for me to talk about the times that I have given in to temptation, so instead I’ll praise Him for the many times that His transforming grace has held me back from sinning.

Family Joy

We encountered the unforgettable home that first Christmas we lived close to Washington, DC. In an era when such extravagance was most unusual, a family had outlined their grand Tudor home, their shrubs and hedges with thousands of miniature red bulbs. Prominent on their front lawn was a life-size nativity scene bathed in pure white light, carefully positioned so that the nearly endless stream of drivers-by could see the faces of Mary and Joseph gazing on the infant Jesus in the manger.

For more than twenty years this December display had a magnet-like effect upon the northwest corner of the capital. In an increasingly secular society, perhaps this family decided that this would be their contribution to keeping the real meaning of Christmas alive.

Remembering it sets me to thinking. If putting the Christmas icon on a lawn in front of a lighted home drew the attention of so many, what might be done to light up Christian homes on the inside so there will be joy in their life together?

Bethlehem Joy

It really is the message that was heralded by angels on the Bethlehem hillside: “I bring you good news of great joy . . . . A Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.” This announcement was heaven’s first press release, the gospel in a nutshell: Divine wrath against sinful humanity has been replaced by His favor! God and humanity have been brought together in the person of “Christ the Lord?” In Him there is peace on earth and joy for all people. “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to mankind on whom his favor rests.” Too often religion brings only conditional good news, telling people that they can come into favor with God if they make sufficient effort—a joy diluted by the anxiety-string attached. The angels’ gospel, though, is pure joy, declaring unequivocally that whatever needed to be done to bring earth and heaven together again—to restore the divine favor upon all humankind—was God’s

Heaven’s “First Press Release”

“Joy” is found as both a noun and verb in the New Testament. Today we say “rejoice,” “be glad,” or perhaps “take joy in,” but older English actually used “joy” for both parts of speech. Luke’s gospel and his Acts of the Apostles have a remarkable number of such references to “joy.”

He is well known, of course, for his focus on healing themes in the ministry of Jesus—both physical and spiritual healing. Doubtless, he knew the proverb, “A merry heart does good, like medicine.” So it is not surprising that he focused on the kind of joy that makes a difference in our lives and family relationships.

Luke presents joy as a pair of bookends around the life of Jesus. The reference to “great joy” at his birth is paralleled by a reference to “great joy” at the end of His time on earth. After Jesus had ascended to heaven, the disciples “wished him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.” All through his writings there is the refrain: In households where Jesus is found there is joy.

Take Zacchaeus’ household for example. His background as a tax-collector and the status in Jewish society to which that doomed him is well known. Deeply moved by Jesus’ unconditional love and acceptance, Zacchaeus publicly repented of his acts of corruption, vowed to make restitution, and held a feast at his house. Luke writes that he received Jesus “joyfully.” In that home, Jesus pronounced the most important words that can be said: “Today salvation has come to this house.”

Luke’s account of the incident with the Philippian jailer tells of joy coming as a result of the good news of Jesus and His salvation. That stirring episode in the life of Paul and Silas and the jailer ends on this high note: “He was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.”

Jesus’ three parables about recovery of the lost, as told in Luke 15, revolve around joy (the word appears as noun or verb 6 times) and climax in the return of the lost son. Joy fills that household: “We had to celebrate and be glad (literally “to joy”),” says the father to the reluctant older brother, “because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again.”

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A personal Christmas tradition I have is to watch Charles Dickens’s classic A Christmas Carol, the story of the self-centered, tight-fisted, joyless Ebenezer Scrooge who has an epiphany on Christmas eve and is transformed. Forced to confront his selfish nature by three spirits who visit him, Scrooge awakens with a new attitude. When he realizes that he is not dead, as in the final scenes of the night, his joy is unbounded.

“I don’t know what to do!” cried Scrooge, laughing and crying in the same breath…. “I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a school-boy. I am as giddy as a drunken man…. “Our giddiness, though, is not from wine, but from the Spirit, for the fruit of the Spirit is joy.”

Ron Flowers is President of the Adventist Association of Family Life Professionals and, prior to his retirement, he and Karen Flowers directed the Department of Family Ministries, in the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

References
1. Luke 2:10, 11 NIV.
2. See KJV rendering of 2 Cor. 7:13; Phil. 2:17, 18.
3. Proverbs 17:22 NKJV.
5. Luke 19:9 NIV.
6. Acts 16:34 NIV.

Questions for Discussion
1. What are some other ways of dealing with impertinent questions?
2. Recognizing that it’s impossible to prove one’s innocence to the satisfaction of everyone, what steps can be taken to rehabilitate a tarnished reputation?

The Pastor and Pre-Marital Counseling

Fifty percent of all marriages demonstrate a friendship paradox. In one setting, we see the joy and excitement of the marriage ceremony, the wedding bells, the gifts, the flowers, the cards, the songs, the fanfare, and the excitement. In another setting, we see the courtroom, the judge, the lawyers, the fighting partners, the mediation specialist, the anger, the hurt, the tears, and the emotional bruises.

It is said that dissatisfaction or rejection in a relationship is perhaps the most common reason people enter psychotherapy.1 According to Firestone and Catlett,2 relationships are ambiguous emotional investments because they are just as likely to foster pain and grief as joy and pleasure.

One intervention that will help stem the tide of failed marriages is for couples to receive pre-marital counseling before they make the decision to get married. People in love don’t always explore the essential issues that are likely to trigger conflicts in the future. So while couples are encouraged to seek pre-marital counseling, all pastors should insist that couples complete pre-marital counseling before they agree to conduct a wedding.

From a purposive random sampling of couples that were recently married in New York City, I discovered that a number of the married persons were given little or no pre-marital counseling.

The North American Division of Seventh-day Adventist released a study done by Monte Sahlin, Center for Creative Ministry in 2010. From a randomized sample of 1,397 Adventist families, 14% got married by a civil official and 2% by other. One could conclude that this 16% got married without getting any form of pre-marital counseling. Of the other 84%, many may not have had pre-marital counseling either.

Ambiguous Emotional Investments

People who are able to address concerns that they have before the decision to get married is made are more likely to find adaptive ways to relate, and their marriages will potentially be more stable. It is an imperative, therefore, that pastors provide pre-marital counseling.

Pre-marital counseling, while not a panacea, helps couples establish a Christian foundation for their marriage, assists couples in developing necessary skills that will help them navigate their way through marriage successfully, and can identify and help resolve areas of differences between them. Thus, all pastors should understand the need to provide this intervention.

Several assessment tools are readily available for pastors, some of these require training before permission is granted for use. According to Ron and Karen Flowers,3 in an effective premarital program, couples come to understand themselves and one another better through the use of psychological tests and other assessment tools. These assessment instruments offer insights into individual temperaments and a person’s psychological adjustment.

A well-researched instrument that is frequently used by Seventh-day Adventist pastors is “Prepare/Enrich.” An alternative, and perhaps the most commonly used instrument, is the Pre-Marriage Inventory (PMI),4 available to clinicians and pastors alike. The PMI addresses interests and activities, role expectations, personal adjustment, interpersonal communication, religion and philosophy, marriage expectations, family issues, finances, children and parenting, and sexuality.

Listed below are some other factors pastors should help couples explore during pre-marital counseling.

• Religious differences: factors in religious persuasion, religious upbringing, different levels of spirituality.
• Social factors: differences in maturational, the changing role of men and women, socially constructed beliefs.
• Personal Factors: unresolved old wounds, lack of self-control, obsessive-compulsive behavior.
• Economic Factors: ability to secure or maintain a job, credit history, money management skills, capacity for risk-taking.
• Educational Factors: failure to improve one’s self, egotistic attitude towards accomplishment, lack of confidence in one’s own ability.

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• Ethnic Factors: cultural differences, levels of family acceptance, cultural biases.

Many couples contemplating marriage either ignore pre-marital counseling or make it a last minute decision. Therefore, pastors should educate their members about the importance of completing pre-marital counseling well in advance of the wedding date. They should also alert their unwillingness to perform any marriage ceremony unless the couple has completed adequate and timely pre-marital counseling.

An important reason why pastors should avoid providing last-minute counseling is that just before the wedding date couples are generally in a euphoric state of mind that leads them to want to overlook disagreeable issues. This mind-set likely compromises their capacity to be realistic about their relationship.

Some people are conscious of deficits in their personalities; this may lead them to form relationships to counterbalance their limitations. This may be beneficial in some respects, but it can also lead to significant differences becoming problematic.

Through the process of pre-marital counseling, pastors can help them to negotiate changes, confront areas of differences, and foster a resolve to work on maladaptive patterns. This allows couples to become aware of potential challenges, to avoid denial of obvious realities, and to escape being deluded by an emotionally charged state of being.

While Satan will continue to target the family, and marriages in particular, he should work for the highest good of their children. The most troubling research finding we’ve learned is that parenting, comprised by poor parent relationships nearly always has one effect. Compromised parenting will interfere with an infant’s ability to self-regulate and stay calm.

“What we savor each other, our babies rest in the cradle of our contentment.”

What I Want Parents to Know

Randy Pausch delivered his “Last Lecture” on September 18, 2007. His talk was modeled after an ongoing series of lectures where top academics are asked to think deeply about what matters to them, and then give a hypothetical “final talk.”

While parents usually have a greater emotional stake in children than children have in parents, still many adult children treasure their connection with their aging parent. They rely on being parented with advice and support even when they themselves are giving significant help to their parents.

An Arrow in their Heart

• Express your love to each child in a way that he or she can understand and can accept.

“Parents, let your children see that you love them and will do all in your power to make them happy. If you do so, your necessary restrictions will have far greater weight in their young minds. Rule your children with tenderness and compassion, remembering that ‘their angels do always behold the face of My Father, which is in heaven.’ Matthew 18:10. If you desire the angels to do for your children the work given them of God, cooperate with them by doing your part.”

“I believe that if the teenager’s emotional need for love is met through the years of adolescence, he or she will navigate the waters of change and come out on the other side of the rapids as a healthy young adult.”

• When we say something negative about our child’s other parent, it is like an arrow in their heart.

“What is the proper use of money? ‘Less needy parents rear less needy children.’

• Less needy parents rear less needy children.

• We each need to have a plan for our personal life, a couple plan (if we are married), and a parenting plan for our childrearing.

“Parents who make the word of God their guide, and who realize how much their children depend upon them for the characters they form, well set an example that it
will be safe for their children to follow.”

“In the education of your children lay not the grand truths of the Bible to one side, supposing that the Sabbath School and the minister will do your neglected work.”

- Play is a child’s work.
  “The little child should come especially close to nature. Instead of putting fashion’s shackles upon them, let them be free like the lambs, to play in the sweet, fresh sunlight. . . . Teach them to see the wisdom and love of God in His created works; as their hearts swell with joy and grateful love, let them join the birds in their songs of praise.”

Jean Piaget declared, “Play is a child’s work.” He profoundly changed our views of children’s intellectual growth by showing that children think about the world differently from adults. He showed us that during play, children develop cognitive abilities like abstract thinking and problem solving. Opportunities to play also present opportunities to socialize. As a parent, you become the prime candidate for channeling your child’s play experiences in a way that is challenging and developmentally appropriate.

- Overindulgence harms children and results in anger that negatively affects the normal development of children, even into adulthood.

“Overindulging children is giving them too much of what looks good, too soon, and for too long. It is giving them things or experiences that are not appropriate for their age or their interests and talents. It is the process of giving things to children to meet the adult’s needs, not the child’s. Overindulgence is giving a disproportionate amount of family resources to one or more children in a way that appears to be meeting the children’s needs but does not, so children experience scarcity in the midst of plenty. Overindulgence is doing or having so much of something that it does active harm, or at least prevents a person from developing and deprives that person from achieving his or her full potential. Overindulgence is a form of child neglect. It hinders children from performing their needed developmental tasks, and from learning necessary life lessons.”

- God has a sense of humor, and so should we.
  “Often an ounce of humor is worth a ton of words.”

- Children deserve parents who have a working knowledge of child development and who learn and practice new skills.

- Children need both nurture and structure, and these shouldn’t be served like a sandwich. Abundant nurture and effective structure need to be communicated independent of one another.

- Parents are potentially the best and most important teachers of their children.

- Don’t make promises you can’t keep.

- Hodding Carter wrote, “There are two lasting bequests we can give our children. One is roots. The other is wings.”

Sue Murray is a spouse, a passionate mother, grandmother, and loyal friend. A retired Andrews University professor, her teaching focus was in the areas of Family Studies and Social Work.

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4. Ibid., 393.
5. Gottman, John & Gottman, Julie, And Baby Makes Three (2007), pg. 28.
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