

FROM THE CREATORS OF FACING THE GIANTS

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THE BENEFIT OF PRE-ENGAGEMENT COUNSELING

By Rob Eagar

On the day I married my wife, Ashley, I must have been asked over 50 times whether I was nervous. The barrage of questions from family and friends surprised me, because I had no reservations about giving Ashley my heart. In my mind, I would have been a fool not to marry her. Yet, so many people questioned my composure that I began to worry whether something was wrong with me. I suddenly became anxious about not feeling nervous!

Fortunately, as I dressed in my tuxedo, God reminded me that I had every good reason to marry Ashley and that He would uphold our marriage. I entered the church that evening with God's peace inspiring my steps. What allowed me to feel so calm about making such a big decision? A major factor was pre-engagement counseling, which I strongly recommend for any single adult who is involved in a serious dating relationship.

Yet, there's a big difference between pre-engagement counseling and pre-marital counseling. Why? Once an engagement ring sits on a woman's finger, a dating couple usually loses any remaining objectivity about their relationship. Instead, the priority of their relationship becomes planning the wedding day. This can make it nearly impossible to stop and deal with any character flaws that might arise. Furthermore, the embarrassment of calling off a wedding can deter couples from being honest about character traits that bother them. The engagement period tends to make couples ignore their problems and push them into marriage, where they wreak havoc.

To avoid this dilemma, urge dating couples whom you know to visit a trained, Christian counselor who can help examine all aspects of their relationship. A counselor can ask the important character questions that couples may have forgotten. Best of all, a pre-engagement counselor can detect problem areas that could destroy their future.

Pursuing pre-engagement counseling does not mean that anything is necessarily wrong with a relationship. Neither does it mean that a couple has to get married. Instead, counseling examines the critical aspects of a relationship to make sure that a man and woman are right for each other. A good time to seek counseling is when a couple has dated for a while and contemplated the real possibility of marriage.

Pre-engagement counselors usually spend four to twelve sessions with a dating couple. Key areas of the relationship are discussed, including personality differences, family and child raising issues, past relationships, spiritual maturity, financial issues, and sexual expectations. Most importantly, a good counselor will review the truths of Christ's unconditional love to make sure that each individual understand how it applies to their relationship. The counseling sessions are also a safe place for couples to address any concerns they may feel about each other.

After dating Ashley for many months, we agreed to participate in eight weekly sessions of pre-engagement counseling. The format was casual, which allowed us to openly share our fears and hopes. The counselor was perceptive and showed us areas that could cause problems for us in the



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future. For example, we discovered that we deal with our free time quite differently. Ashley prefers to make a list of tasks and work on projects, while I prefer to lounge around, read, and talk. Initially, it was a source of frustration because we didn't appreciate what the other person wanted to do. Neither of us was right or wrong, just different. Fortunately, the counselor revealed this issue to help us become more sensitive to each other. Rather than fight about our free time, we learned to value what the other person prefers. This is just one example of how pre-engagement counseling improved the harmony of our relationship.

The process also got our families more involved in our relationship and helped give them a peace about our future. Overall, the counseling was invaluable, because it reinforced our compatibility and intensified my desire to truly love Ashley. Shortly thereafter, I joyfully proposed to her on a mountaintop on July 4, 1999.

When you refer a dating couple for counseling, attempt to find a Christian who is trained to deal with marriage and relational issues. Not all pastors and volunteer leaders have the essential training to effectively handle problem areas of a relationship.

Investing in pre-engagement counseling is worth the time and money because it helps single adults determine whether they should entrust themselves to their boyfriend or girlfriend. By sharing their relationship with a wise, objective third party, they can gain the assurance necessary to move confidently toward a lifelong commitment.

The decision to marry someone is so significant; please do not let the single adults you know bypass the wisdom of outside guidance. Urge dating couples to seek pre-engagement counseling, and you will help them prepare for a lifetime of intimacy.



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