Case Study example

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Recommended Citation
Wilson, Greoge, "Case Study example" (2002). Syllabi. Book 2172.
http://place.asburyseminary.edu/syllabi/2172
CASE STUDY PRESENTED BY GEORGE WILSON 
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THE PASTOR AND PREMARITAL COUNSELING

LEVEL I:

Paragraph #1 FOCUS: The event described in this case occurred at the parsonage of the Conneley Springs United Methodist Church which I serve as the student pastor. Late on the afternoon of Sunday, August 27, 19__ two young people requested that I perform their wedding ceremony which they were planning in the near future. The issue arising out of the case is: How may a pastor plan and implement a premarital counseling process which communicates the distinctly Christian character of marriage?

BACKGROUND:

#2 PASTOR: I am currently a senior at Asbury Theological Seminary. I had been appointed as student pastor to the Conneley Springs United Methodist Church only three months previously. This is my first pastorate. I am twenty-six years of age and plan to make pastoral ministry my permanent vocation. I have had no previous experience in premarital counseling, but my courses in seminary have impressed me with its importance. I have been married for two years.

#3 The Young Couple: I had never met this couple prior to this particular Sunday afternoon. At the morning worship service her grandmother had inquired whether I would be willing to perform their wedding ceremony and I indicated that I saw no problem but that I would want to talk with the couple. She was nineteen and he was twenty-one. He works in a factory and she is unemployed. Neither of them attended church anywhere and they evidenced no Christian commitments. However, not only did her grandmother belong to the church -- her mother was also a member of our church and her parents had been married there, which added a sentimental dimension for the whole family. The parents had not been in attendance at the church up to this point.

#4 About 5:00 on Sunday afternoon, while I was praying and reviewing my sermon for the evening worship service, the granddaughter and her fiancee drove into the driveway of the parsonage. I felt unprepared to meet with anyone at this particular moment. I was wearing shorts and a tee shirt and I had less than an hour remaining to prepare for the evening worship service at 6:00 P.M

EVENT

#5 The following verbatim is a report of the conversation which took place between me and the young couple. The participants are identified by initial: W = myself; F = the young lady; M = the man.

F1: Hello. Are you Reverend Wilson?

W1 Yes, I am. Can I help you folks?

F2 I’m F. My grandmother is a member of your church. She told me that she talked with you this morning about marrying us.

W2 Yes, I remember. I asked her to have you both to come by so I could talk with you about it. How long have you two been dating?

F3 About four years. Will you do it?

W3 Well, I see no problem with it. When are you planning the wedding?

F4 In about a month.

W4 Okay, but I would like to meet with you a couple of times before the wedding to discuss some things which may come up in your marriage that you may not have considered. My intention for meeting with you prior to the wedding is to build up your relationship, not to tear it down.

M1 What kind of things do you want to discuss?

(To this point F had done most all of the talking. But now M entered the conversation. His tone of voice indicated a sense of uneasiness about what I
in a marriage which sometimes lead to problems, such as money, sex, personal disputes, occupations, children -- those types of things. I have to warn you though, I am kind of tough about some things, mainly because I think I need to be, with the divorce rate as high as it is. Marriage is to be a permanent thing, not something we just get out of when we are bored.

M2 Well, we don’t agree with divorce either. But tell me again why we need to come and meet with you before the wedding.

His response made me wonder whether anything I had said had actually been heard by either one of them or whether I was just blowing off steam)

LEVEL 11: ANALYSIS

#6 “Spade” Identification: I employed several “spades” in the process of digging beneath the surface of this event and sorting through the data, including decision points, use of language, socioeconomic levels, motivations, and espoused theories vs. theories in use.

#7 Analysis of the Couple: Family connections and cultural expectations of a church wedding brought this young couple to me (F2-3). Like so many young people, they believed they were mature enough to make their own decision about marriage and all they needed was a minister and a church. In this they reflected a rather general expectation in the culture among the unchurched (and sadly, among the churched) that all a couple needs “to get hitched” is a license and a “preacher man”, i.e., a utilitarian conception of the church and the ministry.

#8 Thus F’s primary concern at the outset was only with “Will you do it?” (F3). The couple’s body language (W4) signaled a polite resignation to something which I was insisting upon, but which they regarded as merely a necessary impediment on the way to the ceremony. They had concluded that they were mature enough to take on the responsibilities of marriage and they evidenced resistance toward a minister discussing with them things which were none of his business. Thus M experienced some threat and evidenced some resistance while I was indicating what I wanted to talk to them about (M1). The fact that he still didn’t understand my reasons after I had explained them may also point to a resistance to what I was proposing (M2). He had remained largely quiet, letting F lead the discussion, until he became uncomfortable about what I might want to counsel with them about.

#9 Self analysis: This was a very frustrating event for me for several reasons. First of all it was an interruption of my schedule. My Myers-Briggs profile (S - J) indicates that I value order and resist interruptions to planned schedules and that I function out of a sense of duty. I felt torn between two obligations; to be prepared to lead a meaningful worship service and to carry out my role as a pastoral counselor. Under the pressure of time I tried to move forward too quickly without establishing good rapport with the couple first (W2). I hurriedly called into place some of my learning in seminary regarding the nature of marriage and the significance of the marriage ceremony (W4). This probably accounts for the “preacherly” tone the first time I was ever approached as a pastor to do a wedding.

#10 I felt especially put on the spot to give a yes or no answer to their request to perform the ceremony with only a month’s notice (F4). On the one hand, I felt like I should just refuse to perform the wedding unless they pushed the date back so I could schedule more time for premarital counseling. That would allow me to put off the decision whether to perform the ceremony until we had had at least one counseling session. But, on the other hand, I felt like this was a good opportunity for ministry to them, so I pressed on (W4).

#11 Another thing which was weighing heavily on my mind was that this was the granddaughter of an active member in my church. I did not know what delaying my decision -- with the possibility that I could even decide that I would not marry them -- would do to my relationship with the grandmother and her relationship with the church (F3).

#12 I felt a particular sense of pressure because I did not want to blow this opportunity. It was my first request to perform a wedding. As a result of my training, I wanted to have several really intense pre-marital counseling sessions before the wedding, and at least one session before I consented to officiate at the ceremony. But when the time came, and the pressure for a decision was on, without taking time to gather my thoughts, I said I saw no problem with performing their wedding (W3). At that point, espoused beliefs gave way to expediency, leaving little room to back out.

#13 My suspicion that a premarital pregnancy might be involved did not help the situation (F4). This prospect troubled me because I know that marriage usually will not solve the problem caused by an unwanted or unexpected pregnancy. Nor had I yet worked out for myself what the proper role or response of a pastor should be to request to perform a marriage for a couple already expecting.

#14 I have anticipated this type of experience with dread. I knew that it would come up inevitably some day, but I never thought it would come up the first time I was ever approached as a pastor to do a wedding,
I always hoped I would get a nice Christian couple from my church who had been dating for years, who everybody in the church knew would eventually get married because they went together so well. This is really the ideal for which I have prepared. When the opposite intruded into my ministry I functioned out of frustration, conflict, haste, expediency and some anger (W4). The result was that we never really related at the personal level, nor was I able to convince them of the importance of premartial counseling.

INTEGRATIVE REFLECTION:

#15 Identification of the issue and the Integrative Disciplines: Several issues are inherent within this event. Some of these include: handling interruptions which occur in ministry; establishing and maintaining pastoral priorities; handling family requests for marriage ceremonies for couples who are not part of the congregation; the need for an adequate strategy and methodology for premartial counseling. I want to consider this last matter: How may a pastor plan and implement a premartial counseling process which emphasizes the distinctly Christian character of marriage? The disciplines I will use to consider this issue are sociology, biblical theology and pastoral counseling.

#16 The Ministry Need: The twentieth century has witnessed an extensive erosion of the Christian values associated with marriage and the family. This has occurred in the context of a move away from the earlier idea of a “Christian culture” toward modern secularism. Ethical relativism and moral hedonism have commonly accompanied this move. An attitude of sexual permissivism has become commonplace in western society. The number of divorces in comparison with the number of marriages has risen dramatically during this century.

#17 Marriage and divorce statistics could be multiplied to show the crisis posed for marriage and the family in our time. A generation has now come to marital age which has been raised under social permissivism, witnessing the erosion of marriage and being deprived of stable models for entering and sustaining enduring marital relationships. The need for effective Christian premartial and marital counseling has never been so acute as it will be in the coming generation.

#18 But these cultural trends have resulted in many persons not seeing the need for nor desiring Christian premartial counseling. They still want a church wedding because it is “traditional” or because their parents -- who are footing the bill -- insist, but they have little understanding of what marriage in general, or Christian marriage in particular, involves. Even more serious, in the estimate of pastor Douglas G. Scott, is the fact that engaged couples often do not understand the distinctive meaning of a Christian ceremony in the church. All they want is a ceremony which establishes a legal contract recognized by the state, and they do not wish either to embrace the church or to commit themselves to a Christian lifestyle (“Should We Marry the Unchurched?” (Leadership, Winter, 1986, p. 24.)

#19 The Ministry Response: The need for premartial counseling is based in the nature of marriage as disclosed in the scriptures. Jesus taught that the marital union is ordained by God (10:6-9; cf. Rom. 7:1-3). He appealed to the creation narrative as his biblical authority, insisting that God’s original intent was monogamous marriage (Mt. and is to remain inviolable until death separates the spouses (Mt. 19:6-9; Mk 10:6-9; cf. Rom. 10:6-9; cf. Rom. 7:1-3). He appealed to the creation narrative as his biblical authority, insisting that God’s original intent was monogamous marriage (Mt.19:5; cf. Gen.2). Only serious offenses such as immorality (porneia) may be the grounds for its dissolution.

#20 It was because of the sacred character of marriage and the sins against it that both the Old Testament and the New Testament communities provided extensive counsel with regard to marriage and the family. A couple of examples of premartial counseling may be cited. The Book of Proverbs was directed primarily to young men. They were counseled to flee immorality and were given instructions on finding a virtuous wife (18:22; 31:10-31). In 1 Cor. 7, Paul provided premartial counseling for persons anticipating stressful times.

#21 The church and its ministers thus have ample biblical precedent for engaging in Christian premartial counseling. The situation in our times further highlights the continuing need for such counsel. The ministerial alliance in one American city has taken the challenge seriously. They drew up a covenant committing themselves to require prospective spouses to wait a minimum of four months between the initial counseling session and the wedding date, to attend at least two counseling sessions in which temperament and maturity inventories were discussed, to study the Bible together and memorize key passages on marriage, and to require unwed couples already living together to separate until the wedding (Ron Wheeler, “No More Quickie Weddings”, Christian Herald 110, June, 1987, p. 23).

#22 Douglas Scott has delineated a premartial counseling process which is intended to assist couples in sorting out secular from Christian conceptions of marriage and leading them to commitment or recommitment to Christ and His church. He holds four primary assumptions about persons who approach him to perform their marriage ceremony: 1) They have been prompted in that direction by the Holy Spirit, whether they are conscious of it or not; 2) This may be the first time that they have really ever turned to the church for help; 3) They have some shreds of spiritual awareness which values “religious moments” (cf. Wesley on prevenient grace); 4) They may have had a problem in previous church relationships which needs healing.

#23 The process of premartial counseling requires the couple to take responsibility for Christian meaning in each step. The request for church wedding and premartial counseling must always come from the couple rather than through their parents. At the first session he helps them to sort out the differences between a civil ceremony and marriage in the church and calls on them to decide which they are really seeking. If they decide to accept the meaning and responsibility of a Christian wedding, he then talks to them about their Christian commitments and church relationship.
the understanding and commitment to Christian marriage and to life in the congregation.
Parallel with the counseling sessions couples are expected to involve themselves in the worship
service of the church as fitting complements to a Christian marriage. Scott’s conclusion is:

#25 “By using an approach that places the onus of the decision
on the couple rather than the minister, I feel I fulfill a
number of desirable goals. This approach provides an
attitude of openness and caring; offers an opportunity for
growth, teaching, and commitment; and most of all, allows
couples to have equity in the nature of their commitment
to each other and to God -- they make the decisions and,
having made them, are more likely to fulfill the
obligations inherent in Christian marriage” (“Should
We Marry the Unchurched?”, p. 27).

LEVEL III:

#26 JUDGMENTS: The literature I researched opened up for me new understandings in the
necessity and applicability of premarital counseling.

#27 It was particularly enlightening on the uniquely spiritual dimension of church weddings in
counter to civil ceremonies and the kind of commitments that couples make to one another and
should also understand that they are making to the Christian community. The place given to
marriage counseling in the scriptures was clarified and the biblical basis for contemporary
pastoral counseling was also enlightening. Although the motives which cause people to request
church weddings are a “mixed bag”, with the spiritual probably buried under secular and
traditional concerns. I think Scott is probably correct in perceiving a spiritual basis which can
serve as a point of departure for pastoral counseling. The study has impressed me that the pastor
has an awesome responsibility here which cannot be taken lightly.

#28 EVALUATIONS: My role as the intermediary between God and the couple was not
played out to the best of my ability. I allowed my nervousness, my newness to the situation, the
nearness of the wedding date, and the fact that the grandmother was an active member of the
congregation to weigh too heavily upon my immediate decision to agree to perform the
ceremony. I was negligent in not insisting on premarital counseling with the couple prior to
committing myself to do the ceremony. On the other hand, I acted correctly in not turning them
away on the day of our encounter, simply because they were not members of our congregation,
or any other congregation. I also acted correctly in my insistence on several sessions of
counseling with them prior to the wedding, although I should have reserved my commitment
until after I had at least one session with them. Finally, I acted correctly in telling them some of
the things I wanted to cover in our sessions together. I wanted them to come into those sessions
with no surprises and knowing what to anticipate.

#29 DECISIONS: There are several things which I learned as a result of this
case which will benefit my ministry in the future. I will need to work at
handling unplanned interruptions in my ministry. When there is inadequate time
to deal with a matter, I will simply ask persons to suggest another convenient
time for meeting. This will help me to avoid getting into situations in which I
end up making snap decisions which I later regret and which compromise my
ministry. I will need to plan the process and content of my premarital
counseling more adequately and to inform my congregation of this so that no
one is embarrassed. I will need to become more relational and work at
establishing better rapport with couples whom I am counseling. I will have to
be prepared to accept the fact that some couples may reject this and that this
may result in some people having hurt feelings and perhaps even leaving the
church. But faithfulness must take precedent over popularity when the chips are
down.