

Battling marriage books?

What are some good books that you'd recommend for troubled marriages and marriages that need a tune-up?

Without hesitation, I would recommend two books that have been around for awhile. They represent a timeless mindsets beneficial for Christian marriage. First is Larry Crabb's book *The Marriage Builder*. The second one is W.F. Harley's classic, *His Needs, Her Needs*, now in its third revision.

At first it might appear that these two books contradict one another. Harley's book follows the conventional marriage counseling wisdom that dates back to the late fifties when marriage counseling was formalized. Typically it has been believed that couple conflict is the result of unmet needs. Everything would be OK, she might say, "If he'd be more sensitive" and he might say, "everything would be OK, if she'd be more interested in sex".

Crabb then presents a perspective that is a full 180 degrees the other way. He states that Christian marriage is built on the premise that God is available to meet all of our basic needs for security and significance. The opposite appears to place superhuman demands on each spouse to make the other feel wanted, special and OK. If a marriage is built on mutual need meeting and this does not occur, many spouses have felt they had the right to resort to manipulation of his/her spouse to get their felt needs met. This creates tension and stress in the relationship that need not exist. If God meets our needs for security and significance, we can freely enjoy our mate and find ways to minister to him/her. For Crabb, the counterpart to manipulation is ministry.

How can these two books be used to help reduce marital discord? 1) By helping change the couple's mindset that a spouse should be a slave to the other's needs. "I'm not happy, and it's your fault"; 2) by directing the couple to find the satisfaction of basic human needs in Father God. This revisits the belief that marriage is best enjoyed with Christ as the center; 3) by buying into Crabb's idea of ministry, using Harley's idea of need meeting as a format. It then becomes a goal to minister to the needs that one is capable of meeting as service to God; 4) by achieving, what Crabb calls oneness by keeping these two elements in balance. This promises to actually produce far more joy than in those brief moments when the spouse does everything exactly right. Human nature may not be content even then.

I propose using these two books together as a Bible study, Sunday School class, as an adjunct to marital counseling and enrichment, couple's retreats and as a format for couple devotions.

Crabb, L.J. (1992). *The marriage builder: A blueprint for couples and counselors*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House. Dr. Larry Crabb is distinguished scholar-in-residence at Colorado Christian University in Morrison, CO.

Harley, Jr. W. F. (2001). *His needs, her needs: Building an affair-proof marriage*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Fleming H. Revell. Dr. Willard F. Harley, Jr. is a clinical psychologist and marriage counselor in White Bear Lake, Minnesota.

Peace,

Jim Harris