

Families That Thrive

By John Blackwell, Ph.D.

Commit First

The story is simple. We were struggling as a couple. I suspect that everyone does at some point. Had Christ said, “Where two or more are gathered, conflict is inevitable,” he would have been just as correct as he was when he said, “Where two or more are gathered, I am there.” Because we are human, we’re going to struggle in our relationships from time to time. Nancy and I have had our share of struggles. We have also tried to learn from our mistakes.

When our marriage was at a low point, I began to ask myself if Nancy and I were right for each other. We were in a world of hurt. I wasn’t doing a good job of relating to her. Nothing I tried seemed to work. We were both frustrated and beside ourselves. We were also desperate for change.

Thankfully, the right mentor came into my life at the right time. He pointed out a fatal flaw in our relationship. It was a flaw for which I alone was responsible. I had put our relationship on probation. I had begun questioning the validity of our relationship. It was one of the worst things I could have done to our marriage.

The problem was that once I put our relationship on probation, I began evaluating everything that Nancy said and did with reference to the question, Should this relationship continue? What I didn’t realize at this time was that putting our relationship on probation only made things worse. I was placing Nancy in an impossible situation. Once someone begins seriously to question the validity of a relationship, there is almost nothing that a partner can do to provide adequate justification or legitimacy. After all, how do you prove yourself? By putting our relationship on probation, I was making our relationship inherently insecure. We were hanging on by a thread.

Fortunately, there was a solution to this problem. The solution was that I renew my commitment to Nancy and to our marriage. So I went to Nancy, owned-up to what I had done, apologized, and rectified the situation. I said to her, “I have put our relationship on probation. This has been completely unfair to you. I am wrong. I want to apologize. I also want you to know that I am taking our relationship off probation. I am committed to you for life. I will never leave you. I am here for the long haul. I am one hundred percent committed to you and to us. I am willing to do whatever it takes to love you and to honor you.”

Our relationship was transformed within a few days. Nancy could quickly move from the terrible feeling of insecurity that stemmed from wondering if we had a future together, to knowing that I was committed, that I would be there for her. My commitment made it possible for her to begin to relax in my arms. The threat was gone. She could begin to open up and share. She didn’t have to spend needless energy protecting herself from the hurt that I was causing.

There’s a kind of paradox with relationships—especially marriage. If we will first make the commitment, the relationship can thrive. A strong mutual commitment lays the solid foundation on which to build a magnificent family. When we commit first, we create the sure footing in which everyone can enjoy a sufficient measure of security in

which we can grow in the enjoyment of our togetherness. The commitment creates the conditions in which the family can thrive.

Try this: Gather the family and invite everyone to confirm their mutual commitment to each and every relationship. Ask the question, “What will it take for each of us to know that we are committed to each other for the long haul—until we are parted by death?”