

Are you missing
what matters most?

Visionary Marriage

capture a God-sized vision for your marriage

by Dr. Rob & Amy Rienow



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Dedication

To RW, Lissy, JD, Laynie, Milly, and Ray.

*We pray that you will receive the faith passed down to you,
and pass it to your children, grandchildren, and beyond.*

Acknowledgments

All thanks to God, who by His grace, has kept our marriage and family together, and given us the Bible as an all-sufficient guide for our lives.

We are grateful for our parents, John and Jean, and Angie and Jack who love each other and have encouraged us in our marriage. Your prayers for us have been powerful.

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Thanks to our small group—the Nelsons, Thompsons, Chamberlains, Bickharts, Ohs, and McAuleys. We appreciate your friendship, prayers, meals, and help with the kids over these past few months. Your help has been invaluable to us. So many friends have been lifting us up in prayer—Chris and Laura, Stephanie, Jeff and Laurie, Andrew and Dana, Drew and Gina, Vance and Andrea, Michael and Sarah, Dave and Jean, and Randy and Christy. The list could go on. We hope we didn't forget anyone. Our whole church family at Wheaton Bible Church has been lifting us

up in prayer during these challenging months after the birth of baby Ray.

We also want to express our appreciation to Amber and Jaclyn Agnew, and Katie and Beth Gottlieb. You have given us so much time and love, blessing our home and our children.

Last but not least, thanks to the entire team at Randall House Publishers, who believe in God's design for church and family to partner together to reach the world. We are glad to be a part of your team to move this mission and vision forward, for the glory of God!

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Preface

Our eyes met across a crowded room. Really! It was August 28, 1993. We were both standing in our graduate school student commons. Our eyes met. We shared a moment of attraction. I (Rob) was too much of a chicken to ask Amy out on a date. Two long months later, it took a mutual friend to encourage me to finally do it. We met for lunch after church then went back to her house to meet her parents.

Five months later we were engaged, and in another five months we were married. It is hard to believe, but we have now celebrated our fifteenth wedding anniversary, and God has blessed us with six children—three boys and three girls. There is a lot of joy in our life, but there has also been struggle and heartache.

Amy's Story

I am thankful to have grown up in a home with two parents who are in love and committed to each other. My mother was a Christian during my childhood years, but it was not until after Rob and I married that my father also trusted Christ. My parents loved me, and loved each other, but I didn't have the blessing of seeing a Christian marriage in action while I grew up in their home.

Even though I trusted Christ when I was very young, my views on marriage and family were shaped by the American culture of the 1970s and 1980s. When I was a little girl, I dreamed of many things. I wanted to be a dancer, a singer, and a writer. Yet above all these things, I wanted to be a wife and a mother. I can remember

playing house, playing with baby dolls and pretending to cook. One of my favorite picture books was *The Maggie B*. It was about a little girl who had a wish come true. Her wish was to be on a boat with her baby brother. She would cook his food, bathe him, and take care of his needs. The “Maggie B” was her own little house on the sea. This was one of my favorite books, and I can remember pretending my bed was a boat as I acted out the story.

Then the question began to come, “Amy, what do you want to be when you grow up?” I caught on pretty quickly that the *right* answer was not that I wanted to be a wife and mother. The answer needed to be some sort of occupation. A wife and a mother is not what you are going to *be* when you grow up. You may get married and you may have children, but that is not what you are going to *be*. I was eventually encouraged by teachers, friends and family members that I would be an excellent counselor. So I set a course to study psychology. It’s funny; when I was little I never did dream about being a counselor.

When Rob and I began our relationship, I joined him in his youth ministry at the church. Now I was a wife, a therapist, a youth worker, and then God blessed us with children. It was not until we had three kids that I realized I was poorly prepared for the ministry of being a wife and mother. This was really what I had always wanted to *be*, not a therapist or a youth worker. The message I was taught repeatedly in school was to focus on preparing for a career. Being a wife and a mother would just fit in accordingly. This was not true. First of all, I had very little training on what it meant to manage a household, much less cook! I had never been taught to serve my husband. Unfortunately, all of my academic training had not prepared me to excel at what I had always dreamed of being, a wife and mother.

From the beginning of our marriage, our home life felt chaotic to me. As a couple, we were always on the go. Home did not occupy any real space in our hearts or our schedule. Home was simply the staging ground for the next activity. Through a major crash—physically, emotionally, and spiritually—God brought me to the place of realizing that things needed to change. My heart needed changing. We needed peace in our home. The only way

to have peace in our home was for someone to *be* at home. That someone was me.

Although I had been reading the Bible ever since I was a little girl, I began to read His Word as my manual for becoming the wife and mother that He wanted me to be. I am thankful that God interrupted the plans and priorities I had for my life in order to teach me His plans and priorities for my life. It was not easy having my views challenged and tested by God's Word. In fact, I had no conception that a biblical view about the role of a Christian wife was any different from the way I was living. I look forward to sharing more of my story with you in the pages ahead, and more importantly to explore the life-changing calling God gives to us as wives and mothers.

Through a major crash—physically, emotionally, and spiritually—God brought me to the place of realizing that things needed to change.

Rob's Story

I grew up in Connecticut. My father was my mother's second husband. My mother was my father's fourth wife. Neither of them were believers when they got married. By God's grace, my mother came to Christ when I was just three-months-old. From that point forward, she did her best to impress my heart with a love for Jesus. Tragically, my parents divorced when I was in high school. The divorce was very painful for my brother and me. Even worse than the divorce was the discovery that my father had been unfaithful. As a young man, I was devastated. It took God many years of working in my heart to bring me to a place of forgiveness. My dad died in 2008 at the age of 90. Miraculously, three weeks before he died, he repented of his sins and put his faith in Christ. His salvation is the greatest miracle I have ever seen and I can't wait to see him in Heaven.

I never had the blessing of seeing a visionary Christian marriage in action. In fact, my brother Marc and I are the first Christian men in our family. Without a legacy to build upon, I had a

shallow vision for what it meant to be a husband and father. To say that I had a lot of growing to do would be a major understatement. But this is one of the great things about God. It doesn't matter where you have been, what you have done, or what kind of home you come from. Our family backgrounds do not doom us to failure. His grace and forgiveness can overcome any sin or any destructive generational pattern. His Word can bring vision and divine purpose into any heart.

Without a legacy to build upon, I had a shallow vision for what it meant to be a husband and father.

During the time of my parents' divorce, I sensed God calling me into youth ministry. I began serving on the pastoral staff at Wheaton Bible Church in 1992, and continue to serve there now in the role of Family Pastor. It sounds terrible to admit, but my ministry at church was my first love. It was not that I didn't love Amy and the kids, but my passion, energy, leadership, and focus was at work. Amy and the kids got the scraps. I was a leader at church, and passive at home. In some ways, I was following in the footsteps of my father. I was having an affair...not with another woman, but with Jesus' bride—the church. In the Bible, the church is often referred to as the *bride* of Christ. Ministry at church had become my first priority, and as a result I was missing my more important calling as the leader of my family.

In the summer of 2003, God brought me to a place of repentance and brokenness. I had to confess that I was a hollow man. I looked good on the outside, but behind the scenes I was not walking spiritually with my wife and children. God was merciful to me. It is never too late to repent and ask God to change your heart! By His grace, God has been increasingly turning my heart to Him, to His Word, to Amy, and to our children.

The Journey Ahead

Our relationship with Christ and with each other has changed dramatically in our fifteen years together. In the pages ahead we will share more of our story with you. We hope it is obvious we did not decide to write a book on Christian marriage because we have it all figured out. But we have become convinced God has it all figured out, and He has revealed His plan and purpose for marriage and family in the Bible. We are praying God will use this book, specifically the words that come from His Word, to transform your relationship into a visionary marriage.

We pray that the words that follow will align with the eternal truth of God's Word, and accomplish great things in your heart and life. Let everything that comes from human wisdom or understanding fall away.

For His Glory,

Rob and Amy Rienow

Introduction

If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing him. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield besides is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.¹

Martin Luther

Christian marriage is under assault in our world today. If you want to truly pursue the marriage God has for you, be prepared for resistance. You will have to push back on the shallow vision of marriage that comes from the culture around you, from your family background, and maybe even from your Christian friends. It will not be easy...but it will be worth it.

Visionary Marriage is not...

This is not a book about secrets, tips, and tricks to building a more enjoyable relationship. You won't find chapters on improving your communication, finances, or your sex life. These things are important, but you probably already have excellent books on your shelves which can help in those areas.

You also won't find a lot of heartwarming stories and anecdotes. Throughout the book, we share many highs and lows from our personal journey, but *our* story isn't the point. While hearing

the ups and downs in other marriages can be helpful, we don't believe that our story, or any other family's story, has the power to transform *your* marriage.

This is also not intended to give a comprehensive picture of Christian marriage, or a book designed for couples in serious crisis. We have walked alongside couples going through the most serious of situations—from adultery, to violence, to addiction. God has restored and healed some of these relationships while others have ended in divorce. We take these issues seriously. This book is not designed to provide an intervention plan for these kinds of marital crises. However, *Visionary Marriage* will provide you with a blueprint which may help you during these challenging times.

We will take an extraordinary journey through the wisdom God has revealed in the Bible to guide and direct us in our roles as husbands and wives, but in many areas we will only be able to scratch the surface.

Visionary Marriage will not be an easy read. If you go down this road, and you are ready to hear from God through what He has revealed in Scripture, you will be challenged. God may call you to change your priorities, your opinions, and your life purpose.

Visionary Marriage is...

We want to help you capture a God-sized vision for your marriage and for your family. Our focus will be on the big-picture purpose for marriage, not more things to add to your relationship to-do list. Does your marriage have a purpose? If so, where did that purpose come from?

The truth is if we don't know the purpose for something, we have little or no hope of being successful with it. But where can we hope to discover the purpose for our marriage and family? The purpose for something is determined by its creator. Because marriage was created by God, He alone defines its purpose.

It is important for you to know up front, we will do our best to approach every issue from a Christian perspective. That means we believe God has revealed everything we need to know about life, marriage, family, and children in the pages of the Bible. Both of

us accepted Christ when we were children. As we grew up, we became convinced the Bible was unlike any other book...that it was divinely inspired, and completely true. However, even though we believed the Bible was true, we did not understand that it was also *sufficient*. This will be a recurring theme in the pages ahead. To believe the Bible is sufficient is to believe that not only is it completely true, but that it is enough to shape our thoughts, perspectives, and opinions on every important issue of faith and life.

In the Christian world, you won't get much push-back if you want to stand on the truth of the Bible. However, it is another matter to claim that the Bible is all you need to determine truth. We enter particularly dangerous territory when we claim the essential foundations for marriage, parenting, and the roles of husbands and wives are revealed by God in the pages of Scripture. That is where we seek to stand, and we pray you will join us for the glory of God! God's purpose for your marriage may surprise you. We guarantee it will challenge you.

Before you start the first chapter, take a moment to pray. Pray for God to do something special in your marriage and in your family. Ask Him to prepare your heart to grow, and to give you the grace to be the husband or wife He created you to be.

To believe that the Bible is sufficient is to believe that not only is it completely true, but that it is enough to shape our thoughts, perspectives, and opinions on every important issue of faith and life.

Why Marriage?



Turn back the clock

Do you remember getting engaged, preparing for your wedding, and celebrating your wedding day? For some it was only a few months ago, for others decades. Think back to that time and consider this question. *Why did you get married?*

We have asked many engaged couples this same question, “Why are you getting married?” Here are some of the classic answers:

“She is my best friend.”

It sounds so sweet, doesn’t it? But is being best friends enough on which to build a marriage? There will be a day when you don’t feel like best friends. There will even be days when you don’t like each other. What then?

“He makes me laugh.”

Laughter is a blessing in a relationship, but it is not a sufficient reason to get married. Every couple experiences hard times when no one is laughing.

“We are getting married because we make each other happy.”

It is true that happiness is part of God’s plan for marriage. In Deuteronomy 24:5 God says that a man is not to have any additional responsibilities put upon him during his first year of mar-

riage so that “he is to be free to stay at home and bring happiness to the wife he has married.” Happiness is a blessing, but in the end is happiness what marriage is all about? God created marriage for far greater purposes than our personal happiness.

“She completes me.”

How many romantic movies have used this line? Despite the fact it is overused, there is some substance behind this answer. God created the man Adam in the Garden of Eden, and in Genesis 2:18 the LORD said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” There is a sense in which Eve completed Adam. But was this the grand purpose for which God blessed them with the gift of marriage?

Is There Any Difference?

We have had the opportunity to walk the path of engagement with many couples through our counseling ministry at church. The majority of these couples have been followers of Jesus Christ. Yet, when asked, “Why are you getting married?” they gave answers which *any* couple could give! Rarely have we heard engaged Christian couples give a distinctively Christian, Bible-driven, Gospel-centered reason for why they were getting married.

Instead, we have often bought into the world’s short-sighted, half-hearted, self-centered vision of what marriage is all about. We throw a little church and Jesus into the mix and come away believing that we have a Christian marriage.

Thankfully, God has raised up many Christian ministries which have impacted countless marriages, including our own. As a young Christian couple, we were blessed by both marriage books and seminars which helped us improve our marriage in many ways. As a result of these ministries, we learned to communicate better, manage our money more effectively, and enjoy a better sex life. All of these things are important. Yet, the end result

for us was an increased focus on our own personal happiness, while we were missing God’s grand purpose for our marriage.

Your marriage today

A moment ago you turned back the clock to consider the question, “Why did you get married?” Here is another question, “*Why* are you still married?”

The way we answer these questions determines, in large part, the success of our marriages. These “why” questions are purpose questions. They are mission questions. Many, if not most, Christian couples get married without a clear Christian purpose for their family. We were definitely in this category when we were married in 1994. We were ignorant of what a Bible-driven, Christ-exalting, Gospel-expanding marriage was all about. We weren’t stupid, just ignorant. We did not know, and despite graduate degrees from Christian colleges, we had not been taught all that God had said in the Scriptures about His purposes and plans for marriage and family.

We were oblivious to the fact that many of our views about marriage, family, and children had been derived from secular culture instead of God’s Word. We had studied and considered what the Bible said about the church, evangelism, worship, missions, money, morality, salvation, the end times, heaven and hell. But we had little to no theological understanding of God’s purposes for the family. Amazing! God created the family as the fundamental institution upon which all human life and civilization rest, and yet we never gave it serious theological thought.

It is our prayer that through the Scriptures we will explore in *Visionary Marriage* that God will give you passionate, compelling, unifying mission and purpose for your family!

We were ignorant of what a Bible-driven, Christ-exalting, Gospel-expanding marriage was all about.

A house with no foundation

Getting married without a Christ-centered, Bible-driven purpose is like building a house without a foundation. It can be done. You can purchase a plot of ground, and pay someone to start building a house right there on the grass. The frame will go up, and the roof will go on. The electrical, plumbing, drywall, fixtures and appliances can all be installed. You can move right in.

For the first few days, even months, life is great. The new house is everything you hoped for. Then you notice a big crack in the wall. The next day the roof starts leaking. A storm comes and the carpets are sopping wet. Why did all these things happen? Did the wall crack because of bad drywall? Did the roof leak because of defective shingles? Did the carpet get wet because of poor installation? All these problems arose for the same reason—a faulty foundation.

This is how we began our married life. Sure, we did some premarital counseling, and it was helpful. The mentors that helped us loved the Lord and loved us. But the relationship issues that we tried to work on were all above the ground. We talked about communication, finances, sexuality, and in-laws. In fact, when we first began our marriage ministry together, these were the subjects we thought were the most important things that young couples needed to talk about. Sadly, all our attention went to “building the house” rather than laying the foundation.

As a result, after ten years of marriage, we realized we didn’t just have communication problems, we had foundation problems. Our marriage had far deeper issues than we realized, because we had entered into our marriage with our own ideas about what family was all about rather than God’s purpose for family as revealed in the Bible.

This is not to say that if a couple does not build with a biblical foundation they are doomed to misery and divorce. Many couples, Christians and non-Christians alike, are able to keep patching the holes and fixing the leaks. They stick together and many

blessings come from their faithfulness to one another. But far too many of us settle for a good marriage. God has an extraordinary purpose and plan for your marriage! He has revealed it in the pages of Scripture for those that will read it, believe it, and seek to obey it.

Repairing the foundation

Imagine discovering that your home has a foundation problem. The only way to fix it is to do the messy work of ripping out flooring and digging down around the house to make the needed repairs. God had to lead us through that messy work. It was serious, and it was hard.

God had to turn our hearts first to Him, then to His Word as a sufficient guide for our family. We will share with you how God brought us to a place of repentance and how He has started the process of replacing our everyday marriage, with a visionary marriage. We are praying He will do the same for you.

Prayer:

Dear God,

Thank You for my marriage. With all of our joys, and with all of our problems, thank You. I don't want to build our marriage without a foundation. I realize there may be major areas of my mind, heart, and life You need to change before I can be the husband/wife You created me to be. I realize that examining the foundation of our marriage may be messy.

Free me from fear. Open my heart, and the heart of my husband/wife, to Your purpose for our family.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for further thought and discussion

1. In your opinion, what is the main reason why couples choose to get married?
2. In your opinion, what are some of the differences, if any, that you have observed between Christian marriages and non-Christian marriages?
3. Think back to when you were engaged. What was one attitude, belief, or expectation you had about marriage that you now realize was incorrect?