

Chapter One

Putting in the Shovel and Digging Deep

I could feel my jaw tightening and my blood pressure rising again. The red light on the children's phone line, indicating line two was in use, had been burning a hole into my calm resolve to keep my mouth shut. Ten minutes had passed since I complained to Harvey that Mandi, his thirteen-year-old daughter, was *still* on the phone twenty minutes past her bedtime. Harvey responded by picking up the phone and, very gently, telling her it was time to get off the phone and go to bed.

Didn't he care that she was *still* on the phone? Wasn't he concerned that she was ignoring his "nice" request? Couldn't he see that she was being disobedient? It probably hadn't occurred to him that I was the one who had to go back to her room twenty times every morning to get her out of bed for school because she stayed up late on the phone every night. Harvey was lying in bed watching the news, oblivious to my rising anger. This was becoming a nightly ritual.

I had a choice. I could roll over and pretend to go to sleep, ignoring the red light on the phone. I could complain again to Harvey, knowing it would end up in another argument, or march into Mandi's room and physically take the phone away from her and play out the tantrum that was reeling inside of me.

The anger didn't start building in me that night over the phone situation; it began when my stepdaughters came to live with us and enforcement of the rules became relaxed. We had very strict house rules before that time.

We gained custody of Harvey's three daughters a year into our marriage; they were ages eleven, nine and eight when they came to live with us. My sixteen-year-old daughter and thirteen-year-old son were already living at home. My oldest son had graduated from high school the year we were married and had moved into his own apartment before the girls moved in.

On the surface, the telephone problem stated above may seem pretty insignificant or trivial. In a normal biological family, it would be. However, in a blended family, the discord runs much deeper—anger comes bubbling up to the surface by patterns of inconsistency and comparisons between children. Add a child's disrespect or disregard for a stepparent's authority and you have the emotional equivalent to soda added to vinegar.

The pent-up anger I was experiencing is common in second and third marriages where stepchildren are involved. The U.S. Census bureau reports that one out of every three Americans is now a stepparent, stepchild, stepsibling, or some other member of a stepfamily. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) enlisted Dr. James Bray to study the stepfamily. One of the findings of his research was the high incidence of divorce in second marriages. He found 60 percent of these marriages failed, many within the first two years.

Sadly, George Barna, author of *The Future of the American Family* (Moody) and founder of the Barna Research Group finds that the divorce rate among born-again Christians and fundamentalist Christians is actually higher than the rate for non-Christians. His survey asked if the people had been divorced before or after they became Christians. Eighty-seven percent said "after."

Every blended family is as unique and diverse as a fingerprint. Each one has different lines drawn from its own circumstances, personalities, past grievances, wounds, traditions and

habits. One family may be a combination of a widow with children and a divorcee; while another family may be a man in his first marriage to a divorcee and her children. Some children live with the biological parent, visiting only on weekends; other children are already grown up and on their own. For some, the ex-husband or wife is easy to deal with; in other instances there is a constant battle. Some families come together with children who have special needs and handicaps; some have serious behavioral problems. The combinations are as limitless as the obstacles they must overcome. The big question is how do we beat the odds and avoid *becoming* another sad statistic?

There is a lot of discussion about the blended *family*, but the bottom line is actually not in blending the whole family—it's in the marriage. Whether the kids blend or not, a divided marriage partnership reduces the whole family's potential for blending and staying together. The Bible says, "A house divided cannot stand." (Matt. 12:25)

In my search for answers, I found three elements that must exist for a family to actually blend and for the marriage vows to remain unbroken by divorce.

1. **Christ** must be the foundation of the home.
2. Marriage partners must have a **commitment** to Christ and to their spouse with the understanding that divorce is not an option.
3. There must be an open line of consistent **communication** and compromise between spouses.

Any blended family combination can weave these three elements together into any given situation, and the family knot will remain tied until 'death do they part'.

Children grow up and set out on their own paths eventually. "Train up a child in the way he should go" (Prov. 22:6), is a charge given to us by God. If we recognize the authority of

God's Word, allowing it to transform us into His image by doing what He says, we will see the vision of our own family knot being tied for life.

Christ as the Foundation for the Home

It isn't enough to simply *believe* in Jesus. In Luke 6:46 Jesus says, "Why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" In the same way Jesus persuades us to act out His Word in our lives as Christians being conformed into His image; we are to live out our faith in our marriages and homes. Yet, the hardest place to *be* a Christian is in our homes and around our family.

Jesus taught a parable in Luke 6:46-49, comparing two men building houses for themselves. The two houses were built on very different foundations. The first man worked very hard because he wanted his house to last. It says he "dug deep, and laid a foundation upon a rock". Just imagine that guy digging and sweating for days, weeks and months to get down to the solid rock where he could lay his foundation. Visualize his blisters and calluses. At the time Jesus told this parable, there were no backhoes around to make the job easier. The man had to have a vision of the house he intended to build and a determination to continue building. Jesus said when the flood rose and the torrent burst against that house, it could not be shaken because it had been well built. We all want to live in a well-built house that can withstand any storm.

The second man in Jesus' parable was not as diligent in his efforts. This man probably had a great vision of his house as well, but he didn't bother to do any digging. He built his house right on the undisturbed ground without any foundation. When the torrent burst against his house, it immediately collapsed into ruins.

The rock was there in both instances, and both men had a vision of the home they were building. Floods and torrents of wind hit both houses. The key to building a house, which will

remain standing after the storm passes, is in the hard work of digging deep to lay a foundation upon the rock. In this parable, Jesus is very clear about the digging. He said everyone who comes to Him, hears His words, and acts upon them can be compared to the man who dug deep. In order for our houses to withstand the storms, we have to be willing to work hard, get dirty and endure a few blisters and calluses in our digging. We must dig until we've uncovered an area of rock big enough for a house to be built upon—not just until we *hit* rock.

Acting upon the word of God in our homes is hard labor. It is much easier to physically do the digging in a construction site, than to apply the Word of God to our own emotions, especially when our children are at the center of the conflicts. We can call ourselves, “Christian,” but if we are not willing to do the work and lay a proper foundation on Christ the Rock, our vision of actually “blending” the family will end in ruin.

The act of digging deep is the daily application of God's Word to the hard emotional issues blended families face. Laboring, even when it hurts and you're worn down by repeated offenses develops spiritual and emotional blisters. For example, when you feel excluded because your stepchildren reject your parental authority, it's time to put the shovel in the ground and dig into the Word. Keep on digging when your spouse seems to bypass or ignore your input on issues affecting the whole household. When you get down to Christ the Rock lay your pain, anger and frustration at His feet. He will give you wisdom, direction and the ability to respond as a Christian. He loves you and cares more about you, your children and your spouse than you do. He is able to work on your situation from the inside out. When you anchor yourself to that solid Rock, any storm can be weathered. The question is—how sweaty are you willing to get? How determined are you to see *your* vision for *your* family fulfilled?

In the telephone incident, I had allowed past grievances to build upon each other. My frustration was not just with my stepdaughter, but was focused on my husband even more because of his inconsistency in disciplining both sets of children. The responses I had allowed myself did not include surrendering my pride and anger. All three of the choices I had pondered had the same result—more anger. Life consists of daily decisions and continual choices because it is God’s design for humanity. These choices are opportunities to anchor ourselves onto the Foundational Rock.

Because of my insistence on having things done my way, anger burned in me for two or three years. My way may have been right, but my unwillingness to compromise kept me from digging down to the Rock. Each small offense became another brick laid in contempt. I was like a pressure cooker ready to blow its top. It didn’t take much to set me into a fit of anger; subsequently, I missed many of the small blessings of rearing my stepchildren.

During my angry years, I taught Bible Studies in church and counseled other women in their marital problems. I applied the Scriptures to every other area of my life, thinking I was giving my *whole* life to the Lord. Outwardly, I was fine. My marriage was good in every other way. My husband and I agreed on most things, but the underlying emotions I felt every time we addressed a parenting issue, were eating at the fabric of my marriage like poisonous and deadly venom. My husband and I found ourselves arguing about something the girls had done or had not done nearly every day. These arguments were usually sparked by my own frustration with them.

Finally, in my exasperation, I cried out to the Lord for help. I read the parable of the two builders with the realization that I had been like the man who built his house on the ground with no foundation. I was not letting go of my pride or will long enough to break a sweat. Jesus

arrested my attention when I read His rebuke, “Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” My digging process had to begin right here in my own backyard.

Commitment

This is where my rubber met the road. In our marriage vows we promise to love, honor, cherish and remain faithful to our spouse, for better or worse, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, until death do us part. Divorce rates are soaring because houses are built without foundation, and we renege on our commitment to each other. Obviously, this can be a touchy subject because unless both husband and wife were widowed, those who are in a blended family situation have probably experienced the tragedy of divorce. Separation by death is very traumatic; in most cases, feelings of love for the deceased spouse remain. With divorce, there is a kind of “emotional death” situation—while the spouse is still living.

As you can see, blending a family presents tremendous emotional challenges to any new marriage commitment, whether widowed or divorced. Walls and wounds accompany divorced couples entering a new marriage. These shadows from our past in themselves are difficult to overcome—add children to the mix and you have the plans for a complicated house-building project. A solid commitment to Christ and to each other is something that *must be established*, even if vows to that effect were spoken on the wedding day. In a world where people change spouses as often as they change cars, commitment has become a foreign word. Without bringing condemnation on the husband and wife in a blended family, we need to recognize we are in this boat together. Our family knot will be tied securely, *if* Christ is the foundation for our home and *if* we are committed to each other—until death do us part. The word “divorce” absolutely cannot be considered an option.

On one particularly aggravating confrontation, I was ready to walk out—walk out of the house and my marriage commitment. I left the house, slamming the door in confirmation of my resolve. It was around eight o'clock and my mood was as dark as the night sky. In tears, I drove the twenty minutes into town. I got on the freeway, drove to the end of the freeway construction, turned around and drove to the other end of the freeway. I went in a figure-eight on the freeway for three hours, allowing myself time to think, cry, reason and pray. Finally, I pointed my mini-van back in the direction of my home, concluding that no matter how upset I was, we were bound by a commitment and a covenant made to each other in Christ that only death would separate us.

Some of our family conflicts were extreme, while others were the “normal” blended family issues. However ordinary or bizarre your story might be, it is real and emotional to you, and you still have to walk through each situation with a commitment to Christ and to your spouse. Without this commitment, the vision of a completed house fades, and the family knot begins to unravel.

Once the marriage covenant is made, there is no looking back. Jesus said in Luke 9:62, “No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God.”

This may seem harsh in today's world where quitting is an acceptable answer. Divorce *is* the easy way out. When questioned about the Mosaic Law on divorce, Jesus said divorce was only permitted under the old Law because of the hardness of the heart (Matt. 19:7). Jesus came to change our hearts. When we commit ourselves to keeping our wedding vows, we have taken the first shovel of dirt towards laying a solid foundation for our home.

Communication

Communication can be compared to the nails that hold our house together. Through it, we share our hearts with one another. More than just casual conversation, communication is a bridging of those hearts. Without it, emotions are suppressed inside like a smoldering volcano, eventually erupting with devastating results.

Christ, the Bridegroom, communicates with His Bride, the Church. His Word, the Bible, is an expression of His heart, communicating how He feels about every issue man faces. If we follow Christ's example of communication, we will share what is on our hearts in love, not anger.

My husband and I talked after my three-hour tour of the freeway. Our discussion continued into the wee hours of the morning, resulting in a method of dealing with all of our disciplinary problems. What I want you to see is how important it is to verbalize our differences. After allowing myself to cool down, we were able to discuss the differences that led up to my explosion. My husband and I were simply seeing the situation from different perspectives—we were *both* “right” from our own vantage point. Compromise came through communication. Communication came by commitment, and commitment through faith in Christ.

Blending a family is an emotional undertaking. As twenty-first century Americans, the world is calling us to demand our rights. The world tells us, if we aren't happy with the way we are treated by our spouse, just move on to someone else. That kind of living only brings more pain and broken relationships into our lives. Not only are our lives affected, but our children could develop insecurities and psychological problems which carry into their own marriage relationships.

God has a better life for His children. As Christians, the Lord is calling us to die to ourselves. This is a difficult challenge for us, but when we pick up our shovels and begin digging deep, the blisters eventually become calluses that protect us from the pain. The reward is a house that can't be shaken in any wind or flood. It will remain.

