

Three words that can unravel a marriage

And three to replace them with

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [September 2022](#) issue



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The Church of England doesn't currently permit weddings for same-sex couples, yet the culture has moved decisively away from seeing marriage as exclusively between a woman and a man. I now offer same-sex couples my standard two marriage preparation sessions. Interestingly, I've found that these conversations aren't much different from the ones I was already having with wedding couples.

That's partly because a good deal of marriage preparation is particular to the individual couple: the sibling that died, the parent who refuses to believe anyone is good enough for their child, the past relationship that casts a long shadow. I once asked a prospective spouse, "Given that you've experienced the worst a marriage can be, may I inquire how you've found the confidence now to be entering it a second time?" I didn't get an answer—the three of us sat in silence for a whole minute.

But it's largely for the opposite reason: most of the issues a couple faces are quite generic. A lot of my colleagues see their role as simply facilitating the couple's conversation. But so many people have told me how grateful they are for what their pastor said in marriage preparation that I'm convinced there's still a place for counsel as well as counseling. I'm not one for mottos like "Never go to bed angry," but I do think there are three simple words a couple may continue to ponder year after year. Each requires the unlearning of another word.

The first word to unlearn is *if*. It's a word that pervades human arrangements. If you keep your side of the bargain, I'll keep mine. If you weren't so annoying, exasperating, and infuriating, I'd be kind, gentle, and understanding. On the wedding day the two people being married dispense with the word *if*—and **replace it with the word *always***. Their love is no longer conditional; it's permanent. It's true that divorce is sometimes unavoidable, even necessary. But this conversation is about aspiration, not desperation. *If* is the language of contract; *always* is the language of covenant. *If* is provisional; *always* is unconditional.

The second word to unlearn is *for*. *For* is the curse of a marriage. Do you know how many hours I've spent making a nice dinner for you? Have you any idea what it costs me to work so hard for you to have a comfortable future? *For* names the accumulation of unspoken resentment, until like a bursting dam it floods a relationship. *For* is based on guesswork, assumed benevolence, a private sense of unrecognized moral superiority. The wedding day is the day quietly to put that word away and **replace it with the word *with***. *For* is about entitlement; *with* is about sharing. *With* requires constant relating, regular recalibrating, honest rebalancing. The point is never to do it well, or quickly, or efficiently—but to do it together. It's not a performance to make the world applaud; it's a mystery to enter together more deeply.

The third word to unlearn is *ask*. All the asking has been done already. Did you love someone before me? Did you ever do something you're still ashamed of? Is there anything you haven't told me? Asking is good, but the questioner sets the agenda. The wedding day is the time to cease asking and **begin something deeper: wondering**. To share your memories of the past is an act of trust and tenderness. To share your wonderings about the future is intimacy of an even higher order. I wonder what you're looking forward to. I wonder what you're afraid of. I wonder who you most want to talk to. I wonder what you most need from me. A wondering doesn't set an agenda, it sets a stage. It says, dream with me, ponder

with me, explore with me, discover with me. When you ask, you almost always have an idea of the right or desired answer. When you wonder, you're opening your heart to something neither of you yet knows.

Three little words. *Always* takes away the fear of the future. *With* means you'll never be alone. *Wonder* means the future is an adventure.

Inside many pastors there's a voice saying, *I'm only a pastor. What do I know? I'm not a psychologist or therapist. And if they knew the truth about me they'd think I was a hypocrite.* So along with being a bewildering experience for the couple, marriage preparation can be an ordeal for the pastor.

Which is why I focus on three little words that everyone can relate to and aspire to. Crucially, even if the couple learns nothing about marriage, they may still discover something about discipleship—because one of the most important things about marriage is that it's training for being with God. The pastor who offers marriage preparation that makes little or no reference to God, on the other hand, ends up being neither a therapist nor a pastor.

The vital thing about these three little words is that they describe three ways we relate to God: with confidence that God is never going away, with joy in the world together, and with awe at God's glory. Marriage is a way to practice the *always*, the *with*, and the *wonder* of being together, that we may better be able to comprehend the *always*, the *with*, and the *wonder* of being with God. These three little words sum up marriage, and they sum up our approach to God: always with wonder.