

Leader Interview

Robert Lewis, Senior Pastor Emeritus, Fellowship Bible Church

Interview with Robert Lewis

Founder, Men's Fraternity

Senior Pastor Emeritus, Fellowship Bible Church in Little Rock, Arkansas

March 4, 2014

Author note: On March 4, 2014 I had the opportunity to brief Robert Lewis on what I learned in *The Good News About Marriage* research – the positive data that counters the five common, discouraging myths we tend to believe about marriage. In the discussion that followed, he shared his thoughts about the implications of this news, and what it means for pastors and other marriage champions.

Robert: As you tell me these things, I really resonate with the need to debunk your Myth #5: the idea that marriage is so complicated. It is so important to dispel that myth!

One of the things I constantly experience through Men's Fraternity is the impact of giving guys a few practical tips on *how* to love their wives. That has a *huge* impact on success in marriage. He has always loved her, but she wasn't necessarily feeling it. So often, the whole DNA of their marriage changes when he gets clued in on a few basic things.

These guys come up to me and thank me over and over again. They high-five me. And it's because they think I solved an eternal mystery. Women! But it's really simple truths that someone just now helped him understand. It wasn't a Mount Everest to climb but a few things that finally made sense and which he started practicing. And suddenly, the wives call and say it is revolutionizing their marriage! They were so much happier. But it is turning based on a few things the guys just didn't know and so they didn't do them. But once they did, it turned their marriage around.

You know when you talked in *For Men Only* about the fact that wives need regular reassurance 'does he love me'? Well, most guys have simply never heard that. They truly don't know that 80 percent of women – or whatever your survey number was – have this deep down "am I loveable" question. So a woman needs to see every day that he loves her *today*, when he sends that text message during the day, or when he reassures her after a conflict that "We're okay."

So it changes everything when you help a husband actually understand that need, and that every time you connect with your wife that way, you are really encouraging her life. I tell the guy: an encouraging note to your wife is like a provocative nightie to you!

I was just in Missouri speaking to a group of 1,000 men who had gone through Men's Fraternity or the new 33 Series. And each of these guys was passionately telling me what changed his life – and none of it was advanced stuff. It was truly just the basics. But the key is that someone took the time to explain to him *why* it was important. And once he understood it, he went and applied it.

So that really resonates.

And it's the same thing that you say when you speak to women – sometimes women are clueless too! You can talk to women about being clueless in a way that I can't!

Shaunti: That is probably true! Okay, so overall, not just about debunking the myth that marriage is complicated, but the rest of the good news... what should pastors do with this now that they know the truth is better than they had thought?

Robert: A few things just stand out about what pastors should do with this.

The first is seeing the big picture of how this gives pastors something positive and encouraging to talk about, about marriage. It is so easy to be put in the position of feeling like we're *against* something today. Against the breakdown of the family. Against divorce. Against cohabitation. Or whatever. And this gives us something positive.

I was talking with the man who is the head of the public schools in a fairly large and economically distressed city. He told me: "I'm in a lot of government circles and government planning. And one of the most discouraging things is that marriage has a bad name. It has gotten the reputation that when you mention 'marriage,' everyone inwardly groans. We see the breadth of social relationships that need support, like the single moms who are just struggling to make it with no help. Or the impoverished couple. So when you start talking about regular, traditional married couples, it seems to stand against all these exceptions. It is hard to mention trying to encourage marriage because people don't think it works better than anything else. And it almost seems to stand against helping the exceptions!" Even though it doesn't!

When I was hearing him say that I was thinking it is hard to stand for marriage. Because you feel like you're being put in the category of standing *against* other things. It is almost like: to talk about Christian marriage you're saying these other social relationships or processes, you're against them. Even though you aren't, necessarily. Who *doesn't* want to help an impoverished single mom? It is just that *if* marriage was stronger, she might not have been left, and might not be a single mom to begin with. But it is hard to get across the positive impact and importance of marriage without then feeling like you're against single moms, or against people in same sex relationships, or whatever.

Shaunti: It sounds like pastors feel like they are caught in a hard place right now, when it comes to talking about marriage.

Robert: Oh, I think pastors are really discouraged in promoting marriage. And I think this is the good news about your book. Because they have been thinking, 'I can't promote marriage anymore because it sounds like I'm a gay basher or against the single person... and on top of that, I don't even know if marriage works!' Since right now, they've been thinking marriage breaks apart at the same rates and people are no more happy in marriage than live-in relationships anyway.

That's why I think what you're talking about resonates so much with me as a pastor. This gives a pastor the ability to stand and celebrate the good that is going on in marriage, and not be *against* these other social relationships, even the single. This gives the pastor the ability to know that they are touting

something that will make a fundamental upgrade in people's happiness! Not to mention that it is a sacred God-ordained institution.

The need is for pastors to believe in marriage again and believe it is an institution worth pursuing and everyone should pursue it. 'Let me tell you what marriage *does* and what the positives are.'

Shaunti: So specifically, if you were able to speak directly with a few pastors to advise them now, what should they do differently?

Robert: First, because your research shows that you can stand for marriage and it really does deliver, I think pastors need to actually preach that message – and preach it without bashing other social conditions. I think they should use your material to preach it! Being able to preach that message to say 'marriage does work' is a huge gift to pastors!

Second, I know you also did the research recently on what makes the happiest relationships happy, that others can apply in their own relationship. [Author note: this was for *The Surprising Secrets of Highly Happy Marriages*.] I think pastors need to teach that kind of stuff, and arrange their marriage ministry to provide more encouragement, rather than just intervention.

Many marriage ministries in churches aren't specifically promoting the secret sauce of marriages. What makes a great marriage and how can we do more talking about *that*? What are the happiest couples doing differently, and for the 20% who aren't as happy, what can they do differently to pursue happiness in marriage?

Instead, most marriage ministries are by default dealing mostly with the problematic marriages. Those get more attention. So the generally okay marriages don't have as many opportunities for equipping or support. We need to switch that. Because there are many marriages that are good but want to be great. Not to mention those that are a bit shaky and would do so much better simply with fellowship and encouragement from supportive friends, but don't necessarily need intensive counseling.

Identifying those things that matter, and beginning to teach those things as principles – like the 12 things you found that the happiest couples do differently – will itself give people hope. Because a lot of people subconsciously think "A happy marriage is not worth going after because it's too hard and it's not going to work anyway." And you say "No, actually, it *does* work, and it's not that hard, and here's how!"

Shaunti: It is interesting; you have mentioned multiple times that what you're getting from this research is the fact that marriage works.

Robert: The message that 'marriage works' is a huge gift to pastors. And then to those whose marriage doesn't measure up to what they want, the pastor can say, here are the things you can do. It starts with this commitment and most likely, you can get there. And it is worth it! And if you are giving up, it won't lead to happiness anyway!

Marriages again become the hopeful north star of encouragement. Where right now it is a black hole instead of a north star, because when people think 'it doesn't work,' then why try!

So people are timid, and they aren't pursuing marriage harder, because they bought into the lie that it doesn't work!

And many pastors are timid because they think that all the numbers show that what God gave us doesn't actually work. And not just pastors but leaders in general don't realize that they are propagating that discouragement by their tentativeness. They need to become confident again that marriage works, and here are the principles to get there. I think pastors could take that and preach it.

The idea that 'marriage works' – that one idea will reinvigorate pastors all over America. I don't think they believe that. They wouldn't say that.... but they don't always believe it.

In some ways, some don't really believe – or at least say -- the biblical principles of marriage anymore. The lifetime commitment, or the discipline of the calling the guy to step up and lead. They think 'I can call them to it, but the people won't do it... It's too difficult.' And what you're saying – and what I see -- is 'No it's not really too difficult!'

I see guys and gals do these simple things and they *work*.

Shaunti: Any final thoughts?

Robert: Just that restoring the idea that marriage brings happiness is a HUGE deal.

Marriage was created by God to be a relationship that no other relationship can compete with. All relationships are not equal. Marriage offers the greatest path to happiness. We are *not* against other relationships but marriage offers the greatest path to happiness and the greatest happiness and the research backs it up.

So when a person says 'living together makes you just as happy' the pastor can say 'no it doesn't.'

And when you practice it with God, it makes you even happier, and the research backs it up. That is so key.

The banner over all of this is the hope this new research gives. That the principles work. Marriage works. And pastors and other leaders can use that to encourage people and dispel the myths and bring into life, the truth that marriage is the supreme pursuit that God laid out when you open the book of Genesis.

The thing I'm resonating with is the hope.