

# **Blending Marriage & Ministry**

10 Strategies For Coexistence Instead of Competition



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# Blending Marriage & Ministry

3rd Edition

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## Introduction

Recently we were asked how to balance marriage and ministry. If I had the answer to that question, I'd be one of the highest paid church consultants in the world! While I don't have a crystal clear answer, what I can do is offer some wise & practical strategies that spiritual leaders (pastors, evangelists, worship leaders, musical directors, church administrators, etc.) should consider to ensure they don't lose their mate while caring for Christ's bride.

These strategies come from my experience as a pastor, and from the lives of others who have either made marriage & ministry fit or failed to make them compatible. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that many of the divorces taking place in the church involve spiritual leaders. We've seen it happen often: ministers labor hard and successfully in the ministry while their marriages come apart at the seams. Although it has happened to many couples, it's encouraging to know that it doesn't have to happen to you nor me.

Spend some time reading and meditating on these 10 strategies, and ask God to give you the wisdom to successfully apply the ones that will help you make your marriage and ministry coexist instead of competing.

### **Strategy 1: Beware the sprinkler effect**

As leaders we're ready to serve and reach the world. What happens all too often; however, is the sprinkler effect. Have you ever noticed that the grass closest to the sprinkler is always dry? It's because the water always shoots to the far edges of the yard while missing the grass closest to it. This can happen in marriage if we're not careful. Everyone else will get fed while our spouse is malnourished (and perhaps becoming bitter). I've seen this happen too many times, and it's unfortunate. Understand there's

nothing wrong with serving the Lord. You just need to ensure you're ALSO serving the one you entered into holy covenant with.

### **Strategy 2: Go for a blend, not a balance**

Spiritual leader Stuart Briscoe suggests balancing marriage and ministry is false, and should instead be blended. He writes:

*I should view my marriage as a ministry in which I lovingly serve my wife and she reciprocates by regarding our marriage as an arena in which ministry takes place. I will not regard attending to my wife's needs and desires as an intrusion into the "spiritual" side of my life of ministry. Being married to her means ministering to her! And she will not regard her marriage as off limits to ministry, but will recognize its necessary, quiet, personal, and intimate moments as ministering to a minister "weary in well doing." She will see the necessary public side of marriage as a blessed base of ministry activity.<sup>1</sup>*

When you recall that marriage is your first ministry, and actively work towards that end, you'll find ways to make ministry outside the home blend with your marriage. Sure, there will always be a give and take. But when you work with the idea of blending vs. balancing, you'll find that the once competing forces aren't really at odds after all.

### **Strategy 3: Play hooky from church**

This one is simple. Skip church every so often so you and your spouse can be away together as a couple (Note: If you're currently unable to get away, depending on how long you've been leading the ministry, it may be a sign that you have not done an adequate job developing leaders in your church. You know you're leading well when your church can operate functionally and spiritually in your absence). Taking time away from church is critically important because it's easy for the issues of church to become

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Briscoe, "Balancing or Blending?" [[http://www.justbetweenus.org/pages/page.asp?page\\_id=79765](http://www.justbetweenus.org/pages/page.asp?page_id=79765)], May 2011.

the focal point of your marriage. Getting away from it all for a period of time to focus on your marriage can be a great way to relight fires that may have begun to die out.

#### **Strategy 4: Leave the title at church**

I'm going to risk offending people here, but know that my intention is good -- I'm trying to help you build a healthy, functional marriage.

I know a couple where the husband is the pastor. At church he's called pastor. At home, he's called pastor. While I know it's easy to use one name for someone, and that respect is the intention, realize that this can begin to have a negative effect psychologically. If you're called pastor or minister at church and at home, you can begin to think that that's all you are (or all you do). Moreover, instead of regarding yourself as a spouse who needs to care for your mate, you can be lured into seeing your mate as just another member of the church who needs attention.

If you're always calling your spouse by his/her title, there is an imaginary wall erected in your mind that says, "I must treat \_\_\_ (insert spouse's name) as my \_\_\_ (insert title) at church and here at home." I'm sorry, but pastor, worship leader, minister, evangelist, bishop, and deacon aren't very sexy titles. They may get you some credibility at church, but not at home. At home, you're just you. Go by your name (or a pet name) so that you - and your spouse - can regain perspective that you are not only someone's spiritual leader, you're also someone's spouse.

#### **Strategy 5: Save the preaching for the pulpit**

This idea is akin to strategy four, but has to do with emotions and communication. Teachers and preachers are gifted with the ability to put together an anointed message that simultaneously corrects, creates hope, and centers people on Jesus' finished work on the cross. Unfortunately, that gift is often used at home to the

detriment of the spouse and children. To prove my point, here's a question we received from a concerned wife-to-be:

How do I get my fiance', who is a Pastor, to be my fiance' when I am emotional, needing reassurance, needing to vent, etc.? Sometimes when I need him to hold me and listen, it feels like I'm being preached to.

This woman is facing the same hurdle a lot of spouses who are married to teachers and preachers face. Instead of getting support in their time of need, they get a sermon (I know I've done it before). Best-selling author Stephen Covey explains in his book, The 8th Habit, emotionally distraught people just want to be heard.<sup>2</sup>

In this case, there are two things that need to happen to ensure the ministry leader's spouse feels like a spouse, and not a member of the church. The first action is to be executed by the spouse receiving the sermon, and the second action is to be performed by the spouse delivering the sermon.

Action 1: Express how you feel. Spouses who feel like they are being preached to instead of nurtured need to let their mate know in a gentle, yet bold way. The best way to do this is to pick a good time and environment to talk, then strategically use a word picture that engages your partner's imagination and emotions. This causes him/her to draw a parallel with his/her own experience. In the conversation, express how you feel while making a suggestion for how to go forward. Here's an example:

*Tom, may I ask you a question? You know how you've mentioned you want your dad to listen to you without offering comments, judgments, or solutions? That's how I feel in some ways. I feel like when I talk to you about a problem or I need some encouragement, instead of sitting and listening to me, you give me a list of scriptures and start preaching like you do on*

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<sup>2</sup> Tim Sanders, "Relationship Mistake: "You shouldn't feel that way!" [[http://sanderssays.typepad.com/sanders\\_says/2011/07/relationship-mistake-you-shouldnt-feel-that-way-.html?utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Feed%3A+SandersSays+%28Sanders++Says%29](http://sanderssays.typepad.com/sanders_says/2011/07/relationship-mistake-you-shouldnt-feel-that-way-.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+SandersSays+%28Sanders++Says%29)], July 2011

*Sunday. You may not feel that way, but, again, this is just how I feel. I know for sure that you love and care for me, but it's being shown in a way that makes me feel like a member of the church instead of your wife. I need for you to just listen and try to understand when I share my emotions with you.*

Notice in this example how many times I used the phrase "I feel..." Notice, also, that I used the phrases, "I know..." and "I need ...". It is essential that you keep going back to how you feel. This gets you and your mate to focus on your emotions without casting blame on your mate. Let your spouse know that you realize you're loved, then state your need. The phrase, "I need ..." is so powerful because it takes what you're asking for out of the want/desire area, and places priority on what's being asked.

Action 2: Save the preaching for the pulpit. To the spouse who preaches at church and at home, let me tell you that you're not alone. I've done it to Cetelia more than once, and I've seen how damaging it is. I'll always remember one occasion before marriage when I preached a pretty lengthy sermon on the virtues of money management. It sounded and felt good to me until I realized that I had demoralized Cetelia, and made her feel like a little kid. Ouch! I'd like to say that I have not given her some sermons (another name for a lecture) since then, but that would not be genuine.

The only way I know to keep from preaching to her (and my kids for that matter) is to first of all LISTEN without offering a solution. It's not easy, but it's doable. When Cetelia wants to share heart, she wants my ears, not my mouth, which requires empathy. According to author Tim Sanders, "To truly be empathetic, you need to be a powerless listener, making an earnest attempt to understand the pain from the other's point of view."<sup>3</sup> After listening, I may ask Cetelia if she wants me to just listen or offer a solution. If she wants me to listen, I don't offer a solution. If she wants a solution, I

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

think about what I'm going to say before saying it, decide what I want to say, say it, then shut up. Not too long ago I read a tweet that suggested we correct our teens "Twitter style," i.e., in 140 characters or less. While it may not always be possible to communicate in 140 characters or less, the principle is indisputable. Say what you've got to say, then stop talking. Or as my friend Norman says, "Practice the 3 B's: Be relevant, be brief, be seated."

### **Strategy 6: Have a plan for your marriage**

So many spiritual guides have a great vision for their ministry, yet have no clue where their marriage is going (I've been that guy). I counsel ministry leaders to have a vision for their marriage. Where is it going? What goals do you have as a couple?

If we ran our churches the way we ran our marriages, the ministry would come to a grinding halt. Remember, where there is no vision, the people cast off restraint,<sup>4</sup> i.e., they go loose (ever seen a spouse married to a minister leave?). I recommend that couples utilize [MarriageFire.com](http://MarriageFire.com), which is a site that allows couples to set goals, articulate plans, and create wish lists for another, all in the name of keeping the marriage fires burning hot.

### **Strategy 7: Spend time together**

Perhaps this should have been number one, or perhaps this is a good spot for it now that your mind is being stirred up. The simple fact is this: if you don't spend time with your spouse, you're going to grow apart. You'll be like a boat I was in some time ago when fishing on a lake. I was so busy catching fish that I didn't realize how far away the boat had drifted from land. I did not intentionally drift far away from the shore, but it happened as a result of me being focused on something else and negligent of my positioning.

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<sup>4</sup> [Proverbs 29:18, NIV](#)

The same thing happens in marriage. We get distracted by ministry responsibilities and opportunities, and lose sight of the one we committed to spending our forever with. Get this: If all your time is spent going to church, and you're not spending time with your spouse outside of church, the two of you are going to move further and further apart until you either become roommates who occasionally have sex or yet another couple who can't find a reason to stay together. I've been zinged for making that assertion, but I stand by it. Couples must spend time together outside of church where they can focus on one another, and not the business of the church.

### **Strategy 8: Female pastors, don't mix up your church and wife roles**

Once again, I'm going to risk offending people, but it needs to be said. Female pastors are used to everyone at church following their lead, and that's normal. Having that expectation at home; however, can train wreck a marriage faster than you can say "supercalifragilisticexpialidocious."

Wives who are leaders in their church must remember that they are called to submit to their husband as unto the Lord.<sup>5</sup> Wives who forget this can facilitate much grief in their marriage as their husband tries to lead at home.

I had the pleasure of meeting a female pastor last year who was bold enough to admit that sometimes her husband has to remind her that at church she's his pastor, but at home she's his wife. She's just so used to leading that she sometimes forgets to slip into follow mode at home with her husband. Before I draw the ire of women reading this, please understand that being submitted to one's husband does not equal being a mindless drone who does whatever she's told to do no matter what. That's not submission, that's slavery. Submission is always given . . . it's NEVER taken. And for the record, husbands, too, are called to submit as a point of mutual submission.<sup>6</sup> The point

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<sup>5</sup> [Ephesians 5:24](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Ephesians 5:21](#)

here is for female leaders to be careful that they don't take the reigns at home like they do at church where they are the leader.

### **Strategy 9: Make a distinction between your calling and your choice**

While God may have called you to the ministry, you made a choice to marry your spouse. One was done to you, and the other was done by you. God's call is without repentance. It won't go away. It won't change. It's there eternally. You don't have to do anything to preserve the fact that he called you. On the other hand, you have a LOT to do to preserve the choice you made to marry your spouse. You must actively court your spouse and be an engaged marriage partner. Moreover, you must be careful not to drown your marriage with ministry talk and activities. Remember, your call is for life without you having to lift a finger. Your marriage? Not so much.

### **Strategy 10: Ensure your church respects you as a leader and a spouse**

If given the opportunity, people at church will drain you dry, then leave your carcass lying at the altar for Jesus to resurrect. While folks don't mean to be parasites, sometimes they are. They will call on you day and night until you're stretched thinly, worn out, and have no more energy to give to your spouse [and family].

The answer is to guard feverishly against this by setting boundaries for your time and availability. This is easier said than done, I know. As ministry leaders we have this incorrect attitude that says, "If I don't, it won't." Viz., if I don't do this, it won't get done. This is a double booby trap. 1) We can become full of ourselves thinking that we're God's gift to the world, and 2) we handicap everyone around us and stymie them from becoming leaders in their own right because we're doing everything (been there, done that).

When we ensure that people respect us as leaders and as spouses, we send an important message that says, "I am your leader, yes, but I am also my mate's spouse."

From my experience, we must teach people this principle because they do not intuitively get it. The best ways to successfully teach this is to continually say it then live it.

## **Conclusion**

It takes a special couple to be married while blending the responsibilities of ministry. Although it's not always easy to make the two coexist, it is possible, and should be worked towards so that the two important institutions don't compete with each other. Whenever ministry and marriage compete, there is no winner. Keep this in mind, and employ these 10 strategies to ensure you successfully blend marriage and ministry.



## About Marriage Works!

Kevin & Cetelia Bullard are the duo behind Marriage Works!, Inc., a ministry that creates resources and experiences that help couples build & sustain a healthy, functional marriage. They have been married since 2000, and are parents to three great children; Max, Caitlin, and Kuria Joy. Kevin & Cetelia both come from divorced homes, so they understand the pain and confusion caused by broken marriages. As a result, they are committed to making their marriage work, and helping other couples learn how to make theirs work as well. Through Marriage Works! they provide coaching, weekend Getaways, and resources that lead to a healthy, functional marriage. You can access Marriage Works! at [marriageworks.us](http://marriageworks.us), [facebook.com/MarriageWorks](https://facebook.com/MarriageWorks), and [twitter.com/mrgwrks](https://twitter.com/mrgwrks).