



8 Keys to a Successful Marriage

Looking back, it was easy for us to fall in love. But staying in love, well ... that takes hard work.

By Vernard

Gant



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The first time that I saw Cynthia, she was standing in the cafeteria line at Columbia Bible College (now known as Columbia International University). Until I arrived on campus in the fall of 1973, she was the only African American attending the college.

She told me that she was excited to have someone of color there to talk to ... to understand some of the challenges she was going through. And I was sure happy to see her! She had a certain glow about her—a sense of warmth and joy that made me want to know her.

It didn't take long for Cynthia and me to discover that we had a lot in common, even though I was from Alabama and she was from Pennsylvania. We were both from moderate-income families and our parents had never been divorced. And we were both followers of Jesus Christ.

Neither Cynthia nor I began college with any intentions of marriage. We both went there for an education. But we enjoyed being together and had a lot in common. Before we graduated, I asked Cynthia to be my wife.

Looking back, it was easy for us to fall in love. But staying in love, well ... that takes hard work.

Now married for almost four decades, some have asked us, "What's the secret to your marriage's success?" Like all couples, Cynthia and I have had many ups and downs. If we were not Christians,

there were times that I'm not sure we would have made it.

Over the years, we've discovered some principles for a successful marriage. Here are eight of them, in no particular order:

1. Don't put your marriage on a pedestal. Every marriage struggles with shortcomings. In the early years of our marriage, I thought that we were supposed to be an almost perfect model for others. But I quickly learned that people don't need to see a flawless marriage. They need to see a couple asking for God's help as they deal with their shortcomings and weaknesses.

When God brings two sinful people together, it's *war*. But God is the God of the supernatural, and He gives us the wisdom and strength to make a relationship work.

Our children don't see me as perfect dad or Cynthia and me as the perfect couple. They need to see us dealing with our imperfections so they will know how to deal with their own imperfections.

2. Do for your spouse what you want him or her to do for you. Consider the consequences of your words and actions. Ask yourself how you would want to be spoken to, or treated, or cared for. And then do those things.

The Bible paraphrase, *The Message*, says in Luke 6:37-38, "Don't pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults—unless, of course, you want the same treatment. Don't condemn those who are down; that hardness can boomerang. Be easy on people; you'll find life a lot easier. Give away your life; you'll find life given back, but not merely given back—given back with bonus and blessing. Giving, not getting, is the way. Generosity begets generosity."

3. Recognize your differences and be willing to defer to one another. Your spouse is not just like you. Learn to live with your differences.

When I was growing up, we didn't have family meals, but Cynthia's family did. Every night they ate together around the table. In my home it was every person for himself.

Today I really don't care if we eat together as a family. But it's important to Cynthia, so I defer to her. You see, there's a lot of give and take in a healthy marriage.

So instead of dwelling on how different you are from your spouse, think about the things you have in common. And be willing to give up your preferences for one another.

4. Remember that deep friendship is a key to true intimacy. These days, you see a lot of sex in the media, as though it's the glue to a lasting marriage. But sex is not the key to an enduring bond between a husband and wife. You have to become friends first.

And what do friends do? They spend time together doing things they both enjoy. When you see Cynthia or me, you usually see the other. And at the end of the day, we try to look at each other and remember, *You are my friend*.

5. Love unconditionally, the way God loves you. The only way that you can unreservedly love your spouse is by putting Jesus Christ at the center of your relationship. He can help you care for

your spouse without expecting anything in return (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

I like to compare God's *agape* love in marriage to flying an airplane. The reason the plane overcomes gravity is because it's built according to the laws of aerodynamics (the way air moves around things). What happens if the plane loses power? The natural law of gravity will take over and the plane will begin to fall.

Likewise, in marriage, the moment you stop relying on God to help your marriage is the moment the natural law of selfishness takes over. The result? Division ... and too often, divorce.

6. Don't think that you are above sin. You are a sinner, just like every human being. But be encouraged. Jesus was tempted just like you and me. He wants to help us escape temptation (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Cynthia and I have faced challenges—we are selfish like anyone else. We often have to humble ourselves and ask each other for forgiveness.

But I don't focus on the struggles, the weaknesses, or even the strengths in my marriage. Instead, I try to park on the sufficiency of God's grace.

7. Love each other without demands. When couples bring rules into a marriage—"This is your responsibility, not mine," or "I've done my part, now you do yours"—that usually reflects a loss of intimacy. Dr. Howard Hendricks, who was a beloved professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, said the more intimate the relationship, the fewer the rules that are necessary to regulate the relationship.

True love is not demanding. It does not keep score or consider who does more work. In the Gant household, when either of us sees something that needs to be done, we do it.

I fill the dishwasher; Cynthia fills the dishwasher. We cook meals together. Cynthia does sewing and makes our window treatments, and I hang them. We do yardwork together (Cynthia likes to mow and I like to trim), and we shop together. We have an unusual commonality.

8. Do not get into debt. Cynthia and I have chosen to have a simple lifestyle, and that philosophy has transferred to our children. They haven't seen us constantly battling over things that are here today and gone tomorrow.

Part of our commitment has been to live without debt. We have no credit card debt. No car debt. One car is 16 years old, another is 10 years old, and they get us where we need to go.

We just made choices to live with less and are glad we did. It makes for a more peaceful life.

The secret to our success

After almost four decades of marriage, I can say from experience that Jesus Christ can bring true unity into any relationship. Cynthia and I attribute the success of our marriage to that.

And we believe that, with Christ's help, our marriage will be even better tomorrow ... and then the day after that.

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Next Steps

1. Would you like some marriage advice from couples married 50 years and more? Read: ["10 Ideas: Helping Your Marriage Last a Lifetime."](#)
2. Vernard and Cynthia Gant learned to defer to one another as they recognized each other's differences. [Listen](#) as author Shaunti Feldhahn tells FamilyLife Today® listeners about the differences between men and women.
3. Take your marriage to the next level by [attending a Weekend to Remember® marriage getaway](#). You'll learn how to build intimacy, improve communication, and much more.



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Meet the Author: Vernard Gant



Dr. Vernard Gant and his wife, Cynthia, have been married since 1977. They have three grown children and live in Colorado. Dr. Gant is the director of Urban School Services with the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI). In this position, he is responsible for overseeing over 700 Christian schools throughout the nation that target and serve minority, under-resourced, and urban children. Cynthia works alongside her husband as a volunteer with ACSI.