



PASTORAL CARE FOR CHRISTIAN YOUTH IN PREPARATION FOR MARRIAGE USING EFFECTIVE CBT METHODS (AARON BECK) AND THE VALUE-SEMANTIC ORIENTATION OF CLASSICAL BIBLICAL COUNSELING (JAY ADAMS)

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Abstract. The article addresses the pastoral care for Christian youth during marriage preparation using effective cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) methods developed by Aaron Beck and the value-semantic orientation of classical biblical counseling by Jay Adams. The aim of the study is to demonstrate the importance of religious values and spiritual preparation for young couples as a key factor in reducing divorce rates and strengthening stable family relationships. General scientific methods were used in the course of this research, including analysis, synthesis, comparison, generalization, modeling, and case studies. The research findings indicate that the modern institution of marriage faces significant challenges, including high divorce rates, particularly in the early years of marriage. Statistics show that about 60% of couples who marry between the ages of 20 and 25 divorce within the first 3-5 years of marriage. Despite a general decline in divorce rates in the United States over the past few decades, many young couples still encounter serious difficulties at the beginning of their married lives. This highlights the need for more effective premarital preparation, which can help prevent such problems. Studies have shown that premarital counseling significantly reduces conflict levels, promotes effective communication skills, and teaches couples how to cope with crisis situations. This is especially important for couples without prior cohabitation experience, as such programs help develop a healthy perception of reality, respect for personal boundaries, and emotional intimacy, ultimately reducing the long-term risk of divorce. The study also concludes that combining Aaron Beck's cognitive behavioral therapy methods with Jay Adams' classical biblical counseling is an effective approach to preparing young couples for marriage. This integrated method fosters mutual support, emotional stability, and constructive conflict resolution, which form the foundation for strong and stable family relationships. An analysis of practical cases confirms the effectiveness of the approach, as this enables couples to gain a deeper understanding of the value of mutual respect and spiritual growth. The practical significance of the study lies in the potential application of combined CBT and biblical counseling methods to the development of effective premarital preparation programs, contributing to reduced divorce rates and stronger family relationships.

Keywords: premarital preparation, CBT, biblical counseling, family relationships, divorce.

Introduction

In modern society, marriage remains one of the most important social institutions, significantly impacting family stability, child-rearing, and overall societal well-being. However, in recent decades, the institution of marriage has faced considerable challenges related to shifting cultural values, economic instability, and the psychological aspects of personal relationships. Many young couples enter marriage without adequate preparation for the real-life challenges they will encounter, including



financial issues, unclear family roles, undefined boundaries of the new family, lack of effective communication skills, and difficulties in conflict resolution. Additionally, cultural changes, such as the reevaluation of traditional family roles and the rise of individualism, present further obstacles to maintaining long-term marital relationships.

In this context, there is a growing need for effective premarital preparation programs that address both psychological and spiritual aspects of marriage. Particularly relevant would be approaches that combine methods of modern cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), focusing on the correction of destructive patterns of thinking and behavior, with traditional pastoral counseling grounded in Christian principles, emphasizing the sacramental significance of marriage as a Divine covenant. This coupling provides a solid foundation for stable and long-lasting relationships, promoting the formation of strong families, which are the cornerstone of a healthy society.

The issue of premarital preparation remains underexplored, especially within Christian communities where marriage is viewed not only as a social contract but as a sacred union established by God. Many traditional premarital programs focus primarily on moral aspects and theological foundations while modern psychological methods often overlook the spiritual dimension of marital relationships.

Methods and Methodology

The research methodology was based on general scientific methods, including analysis of scientific literature, biblical texts, and practical observation within church settings. It also included collaboration with pastors, who participated in the development and testing of the course. This comprehensive approach not only provided a theoretical foundation for the importance of thorough premarital preparation but also allowed for practical testing of the proposed methodology in real ministry settings, emphasizing the novelty and practical relevance of the study. The research combined Aaron Beck's cognitive behavioral approach (CBT) with Jay Adams' classical biblical counseling, creating a practical case-based course that includes seven modules. These modules cover key aspects of family life, such as building emotional intimacy, effective conflict management, financial planning, communication skills, and



parenting preparation. The analysis of the course results demonstrated that this integrated approach is effective in strengthening marital relationships, reducing conflict levels, and improving overall marital satisfaction.

Literature Review

The topic of combining cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) methods, as developed by Aaron Beck, with the value-semantic approach of biblical counseling proposed by Jay Adams is innovative and requires further scholarly reflection. While the international academic literature already contains references to individual experimental attempts at integrating these methods or to the effectiveness of each approach when applied independently, a systematic study of their interaction—particularly in the context of pastoral care for Christian youth during premarital preparation—remains a relevant and promising direction for academic inquiry.

Aaron T. Beck, the founder of CBT, has contributed significantly to this field, as highlighted in the works of J.S. Beck and S.A. Fleming [1] which describe the history and key principles of this method. An important aspect of this approach is its focus on changing dysfunctional thought patterns, which is particularly valuable in the context of marital counseling. F.M. Dattilio [2] has further developed this tradition by emphasizing the importance of a comprehensive approach to working with families and couples, thus highlighting the cognitive and behavioral components necessary for maintaining healthy relationships.

The spiritual component of counseling is also crucial, as discussed by F.A. DiBlasio [3], who examines the concept of Christian forgiveness, and F. Meroni [8], who emphasizes the integration of mercy and truth in pastoral care for families. These studies demonstrate that integrating spiritual principles can significantly impact marital well-being, complementing traditional CBT methods.

Social aspects of modern marital relationships are explored by K. Fry and K. Parker [5], who analyze demographic changes in the United States, including the increasing number of single adults, and S. Kreller [6], who studies the effectiveness of premarital preparation in church settings. These findings are supported by the work of



A.C. Kunle and O. Adedayo [7], who assess the impact of pastoral care on youth, and S. Qari [9], who evaluates the long-term effects of marriage on happiness levels.

In addition to academic studies, contemporary expert reviews and publications play a significant role, such as the analysis by Wilkinson & Finkbeiner [11] which examines current divorce trends and the articles from the University of Houston [10] which address global social changes in marital attitudes.

Purpose of the article

The purpose of the article is to demonstrate the importance of religious values and spiritual preparation for young couples as a key factor in reducing divorce rates and strengthening stable family relationships.

Research results

In today's world, the institution of marriage faces significant challenges that impact family stability and the overall well-being of society. According to Fry and Parker (2021), the percentage of adults aged 25-54 in the United States who are not married increased from 29% in 1990 to 38% in 2019. A significant part of this growth is due to the rising number of individuals who have never married (from 17% to 33%) and those who choose cohabitation instead of traditional marriage (from 4% to 9% over the same period) [5]. The main reasons for this trend can be summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 – Reasons for declining marriage rates among the US population

Reasons for avoiding marriage	Examples and explanations
Career opportunities and independence	Women increasingly choose professional self-realization instead of traditional family roles, contributing to their financial independence (University of Houston, 2023)
Social and economic independence	Greater financial stability allows women to avoid economic dependence on a partner. For example, in 2019, the median income for unmarried men was only \$35,600, compared to \$57,000 for married men (Fry & Parker, 2021)
Issues of fidelity and inequality	Frequent infidelity and lack of intellectual equality in relationships. For instance, in Barbados, high levels of infidelity significantly reduce the desire to marry (University of Houston, 2023)
Strong family ties	Women often choose to live with family members, who provide more stable support than partners (University of Houston, 2023)
Reevaluation of social norms	Rejection of traditional views on marriage as the only acceptable form of cohabitation (University of Houston, 2023)
Emotional support outside marriage	Friendships and family bonds are becoming more important than formal relationships, reducing the perceived need for marriage (University of Houston, 2023)

Note: systematized based on sources Fry & Parker (2021) [5] and University of Houston, 2023 [10].



Economic stability plays a key role in the decision to marry. According to Fry & Parker (2021), unmarried men in the United States face significantly worse economic conditions compared to their married counterparts. For example, only 73% of unmarried men were employed in 2019, compared to 91% of married men. Among women, this gap is less pronounced, with 77% of unmarried women employed, compared to 74% of married women [5]. Additionally, about 36% of unmarried men are considered financially vulnerable while this figure drops to just 13% among married men. This indicates that economic stability significantly influences the decision to start a family.

Educational attainment is also a critical factor in the decision to marry. Data show that only 26% of unmarried men hold a bachelor's degree, compared to 37% of married men. Among women, this gap is even larger, with 43% of married women holding a college degree, compared to just 33% of unmarried women (Fry & Parker, 2021) [5].

The decline in marriage rates is also compounded by relatively high divorce rates. Although the overall divorce rate in the United States has decreased from 4.0 per 1,000 people in 2000 to 2.5 per 1,000 in 2021, the risk of divorce in the early years of marriage remains high. According to research by Wilkinson & Finkbeiner (2025), approximately 60% of couples who marry between the ages of 20 and 25 divorce, often within the first 3-5 years [11]. This highlights the need for the deeper preparation of young people for marriage, which should include both cognitive-behavioral elements and spiritual guidance to foster stable and healthy family relationships.

All of this underscores the importance of more comprehensive preparation for young couples entering family life. For Christian communities, this preparation must be based on biblical principles, providing not only psychological but also spiritual foundations for marriage. In Christian understanding, marriage is not merely a social contract but a profound spiritual union established by God Himself.

Marriage has its roots in divine design, as stated in the Holy Scriptures. In Genesis 2:24, it is written, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." This definition emphasizes not only the physical but also the spiritual unity that should form the foundation of any Christian



marriage. Kunle & Adedayo (2021), in their study on the nature of marriage, emphasize that it is the first institution created by God after the creation of the world, making it the foundation for the entire social structure of humanity. The researchers highlight that marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman who voluntarily choose to unite, despite different family backgrounds, to fulfill God's purpose. This union is meant to be sealed in blood and can only be dissolved by death, indicating its indissolubility and profound spiritual significance [7].

In Christian teaching, marital unity is seen as a reflection of the deep, mutual love that forms the foundation of existence itself. As F. Meroni (2014) notes, life flows from the truth that can be understood by following the path of Jesus (John 14:6), and this truth about life makes it possible, meaningful, and fruitful. Through His Son, our Heavenly Father brings forth children in the Spirit, created in His image (Genesis 1:27-28). This spiritual union between a husband and a wife in marriage becomes the foundation for the gift of life, as children are received from God and given back to Him through love and service [8].

This perspective gives marriage not only social but also sacramental significance. The life that emerges from this union is not merely a biological process, but a profound spiritual act that reflects the inner unity of father and mother. As F. Meroni (2014) further emphasizes, through mutual self-giving and acceptance, a married couple establishes an irreversible unity, becoming a source of life for both their children and the family itself. The nature of sexual difference, which makes marital union possible, forms the basis for their spiritual unity and allows them to create a true family [8].

Practical aspects of preparing young couples for marriage are also well-documented in the scientific literature. The importance of such programs is confirmed by recent studies in the field of marital education and counseling, including those by Kreller (2022) and DiBlasio (2022), which highlight significant benefits for marital stability and relationship quality [3,6].

Let us consider the key reasons why such work is necessary:

1. Lack of experience in living as a couple. Many young couples enter marriage without a sufficient understanding of how married life works. They may have an



idealized view of marriage that does not account for possible challenges. Marriage education programs help fill this gap by providing couples with a realistic understanding of family relationships and potential crises [6]. This includes teaching skills in adapting to new circumstances, mutual support, and conflict resolution, which can significantly reduce the risk of divorce even many years after the start of married life.

2. Need for healthy reality assessment skills. One of the main challenges for couples is mastering the ability to assess situations accurately and resolve conflicts without losing respect for their partner. Studies show that the lack of such skills is one of the main causes of divorce [9]. For example, using integrative methods that include selective forgiveness can significantly improve relationship satisfaction and ensure long-term marital stability [3].

3. Respect for personal boundaries. The ability to respect personal boundaries and accept each other's weaknesses is fundamental to healthy marital relationships. As Kreller (2022) emphasizes, marital counseling can help couples understand themselves and their partner better, leading to deeper emotional connection and more stable relationships. It also reduces relationship anxiety and fosters trust, which is critically important for overcoming crisis moments [6].

4. Developing adaptation skills. In today's world, the stability of marital relationships is often tested by external factors such as financial difficulties, health problems, or career challenges. The ability to adapt to such changes without losing emotional stability is an important part of long-term marriage [6]. Marriage education programs can teach couples adaptive thinking methods, including the use of cognitive behavioral techniques that involve ecological exit from conflicts, humility in the face of circumstances, and the willingness to change strategies when necessary.

5. Forming a conscious approach to marriage. Marriage is not just an emotional choice but also a conscious decision that requires a clear understanding of its meaning, goals, and the methods of achieving these goals. Educational programs can help couples understand marriage as a spiritual union that reflects the unity of Christ and the Church [8]. This involves readiness for sacrifice, mutual support, and unconditional



acceptance of each other, which is the foundation of the Christian understanding of marital love.

Thus, marriage education programs are critically important for strengthening relationships and forming stable families. They provide young couples with the necessary knowledge, skills, and psychological support, helping them create long-lasting and harmonious relationships that align with God's design for marriage.

Given the significant decline in marriage rates and the high rates of divorce after marriage, it is evident that preparing young couples for marriage should include not only spiritual but also psychological mentoring. This is especially important for Christian communities, where marriage is viewed not just as a social contract but as a sacred union established by God, reflecting His eternal love and faithfulness. Creating such strong marital relationships requires both spiritual depth and practical skills in effective communication and conflict resolution.

In 2013, the author of this study developed a premarital preparation course for Christian youth, which she and her husband conducted together in a local church. This course included seven sessions dedicated to the spiritual foundations of marriage, building emotional intimacy, conflict management, development of effective communication skills, preparation for parenthood, financial planning, and family roles. The goal of the course was not only to provide young couples with basic knowledge about the biblical understanding of marriage but also to prepare them for the real-life challenges that couples face at the beginning of their journey.

The foundation of this spiritual guidance included the methods of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) by Aaron Beck and the value-oriented approach of classical biblical counseling by Jay Adams. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) developed by Aaron Beck [1] offers effective methods for working with married couples, helping them recognize and correct destructive thinking patterns. Initially created for treating depression, this method has since been adapted for the use as a means of addressing various psychological problems, including interpersonal conflicts, addiction, anxiety disorders, and even schizophrenia (Beck & Fleming, 2021). However, its application in the context of marital relationships has also proven to be effective. Epstein N. B. and



Baucom D. H. (2002) note that CBT not only reduces conflict levels but also improves mutual understanding and overall marital satisfaction, creating a foundation for long-term, stable relationships [4].

The main goal of cognitive therapy in working with married couples is to identify and change negative automatic thoughts that often become the source of conflicts. For example, thoughts like “He doesn’t value me,” “She never listens to me,” or “Our marriage is doomed” can increase emotional distance and provoke tension in relationships [1]. The therapist helps couples recognize these maladaptive beliefs, test them against real facts, and replace them with more constructive and supportive thoughts [2]. For example, instead of the automatic reaction “He doesn’t value me,” a more balanced belief might be, “Sometimes he is busy, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t value me” [4]. This approach helps not only to reduce conflict levels but also to create a stronger emotional bond between partners.

In cognitive-behavioral therapy practice, a range of effective techniques are used to achieve these changes, including cognitive restructuring (reframing negative thoughts), Socratic dialogue (guiding the client to independent insights through a series of clarifying questions), automatic thought journaling (to record triggers, emotions, and reactions), and the “stop technique” (interrupting intrusive destructive thoughts at the moment they arise). These tools are widely accessible, well-researched, and broadly applied by psychotherapists around the world.

Moreover, CBT helps develop more adaptive beliefs that contribute to long-term marital stability. This process involves not only correcting maladaptive thoughts but also forming new, more positive attitudes that promote emotional intimacy and mutual support [2]. This is especially important for couples facing crises, such as financial difficulties, health problems, or parenting challenges. Learning such strategies helps create a foundation for healthy and stable relationships, which is crucial for maintaining marriage over the long term.

It is important to note that, in addition to cognitive changes, successful therapy includes the development of new behavioral strategies that help couples interact effectively with each other. This can include developing active listening skills,



emotional support, constructive conflict resolution, and acceptance of various life scenarios (Epstein & Baucom, 2002). These skills enable couples to adapt to changes more easily, avoid chronic conflicts, and maintain emotional intimacy even in challenging situations.

At the same time, classical biblical counseling adds a deeper spiritual dimension to the above practices, emphasizing the indissolubility of marriage as a sacred union established by God Himself [7]. This approach helps couples realize the profound meaning of marital unity reflecting Christ's love for the Church, as described in the letter to the Ephesians (Eph. 5:25-33). This awareness creates a solid foundation for long-term relationships, strengthening the motivation to preserve the marriage even in difficult times.

In 2011, Ruslan and Ekaterina Fakhrutdinov implemented a successful attempt at applying an integrated approach that combined methods of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) with classical biblical counseling within the framework of an original course designed for Christian youth preparing for marriage. This course became an innovative example of the integration of scientific psychology with theological counseling in the field of premarital preparation.

To better understand how such preparation can help couples overcome difficulties in the early years of marriage, it is appropriate to examine several anonymized cases based on real-life situations of couples who completed the course conducted by Ruslan and Ekaterina Fakhrutdinov in 2011.

One case involves a young couple who moved into a new home after their wedding. The move came with numerous challenges, including setting up a new household, financial expenses, adjusting to a new environment, and finding a balance between work, studies, and ministry. As often happens, these new circumstances added pressure to their relationship so the partners began to feel increasing tension. However, thanks to the preparation that they received in the course, the couple was able to manage these challenges. They applied effective communication skills, learned to discuss their needs and fears openly, and supported each other in difficult situations. For example, when conflicts arose over the division of household responsibilities, the



couple managed to find a compromise and create a system that took into account each partner's individual needs, reducing emotional stress.

Another case involves a couple who faced significant challenges after the birth of back-to-back children. Shortly after their wedding, the young family had to care for an infant and plan for their future simultaneously. This required not only physical endurance but also emotional stability. They encountered problems with task distribution, time management, and maintaining romance and intimacy in their relationship. However, thanks to prior preparation, the couple was able to develop a flexible schedule that allowed both partners to continue their ministry and professional growth without losing connection with each other. They learned to support each other even in stressful situations, make time for rest and joint prayer, which helped preserve their spiritual and emotional unity.

These examples illustrate the importance of approaching marriage consciously, understanding not only its spiritual meaning but also the practical aspects of shared life. Proper preparation helps couples avoid many disappointments and misunderstandings, creating a foundation for stable and happy relationships.

Thus, integrating Aaron Beck's cognitive behavioral techniques with classical biblical approaches to pastoral care allows for the creation of a comprehensive system for preparing young couples for marriage. This provides both psychological and spiritual stability, promoting the formation of responsible parents capable of building strong and loving families, which are the foundation of a healthy society.

Combining cognitive behavioral methods with biblical principles creates a comprehensive approach to the preparation of young couples for marriage. This not only reduces conflict levels and increases relationship satisfaction but also creates a foundation for long-term and stable marital relationships, which are critically important for both individual families and society as a whole. Research shows that stable marriages positively impact the well-being of children, their emotional development, and academic success, which, in turn, strengthens the social structure of society [8].



Conclusions

Modern marriage faces significant challenges, including high divorce rates, particularly in the early years of marriage. For example, about 60% of couples who marry between the ages of 20 and 25 divorce within the first 3-5 years of married life. Despite the overall decline in divorce rates in the United States over recent decades, many young couples still encounter serious difficulties early in their marriage, highlighting the need for better premarital preparation.

Premarital preparation is essential, as it helps reduce conflict levels, develop effective communication skills, and teach couples how to handle crises. This is especially important for those without prior cohabitation experience, who need skills in healthy reality assessment and respect for personal boundaries. Such programs also promote emotional intimacy and reduce the risk of divorce, even years after the start of married life.

To address these issues, a premarital preparation course was developed that combines Aaron Beck's CBT methods with Jay Adams' classical biblical counseling. An analysis of practical case studies showed that this method is effective, as it helps couples develop mutual support, emotional stability, and constructive conflict resolution skills, which are keys to building strong and stable family relationships.

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