

Christian marriage

Transforming Truths

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CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

“Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled.” – Hebrews 13:4

The institution of marriage is highly spoken of in the Bible. It is considered the most sacred of human relationships. It forms the basis of the family, the central unit in man's dealings with one another. Based on love, marriage forms the environment God planned for the nurturing of children.

As an expression of love, marriage should form the most beautiful of human relationships. Often it does. However, it takes but little observation to note that many Christian marriages, like others around them, only too often founder in the turbulent waters of daily living.

Incompatibilities, misunderstandings, lack of communication, insensitivity to the needs of each other and the constant pressures of daily routine all conspire against the smooth flow of family life. These are some of the pressures that steal the bliss from matrimony, and too often lead to separation or the divorce courts. It is the purpose of the articles that follow to examine the Scriptural principles that underlie God's design for the institution of marriage.

THREE MARRIAGE PRINCIPLES

“Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.” - Genesis 2:24

When God created the first human pair in the Garden of Eden, he saw fit to give them but two ordinances. One was vertical—governing their relationship with himself: Obey and live, disobey and die. The other was horizontal—governing their relationship with each other: Marriage, as spelled out in the text above.

In the simple words of this verse rest three great principles. The violation of these three principles is becoming increasingly recognized by psychiatrists and marriage counselors today as the three main problems in unhappy marriages.

■ LEAVE

After some 18 to 20 years or more under the parental roof, marriage provides an entirely new environment. Each of the partners has been raised differently. Each brings different expectations into the new relationship.

“This isn’t the way we did it at home.” “My mother cooked her potatoes this way.” “My father always helped with the dishes.” “But I always go out with my friends on Wednesday nights.” The list goes on. Comparisons are always odious, and even more so in the delicate adjustment to married life.

The new world of marriage needs to be approached as a challenge. There is a new life to be made together. It is not based on the past, but on the unwritten future. How the pages of the future will be written depends on two people—the husband and the wife.

The Scriptural command to leave one’s parents does not mean a total separation from the past. It does mean that the past and its relationships will not rule the present or the future. The new relationship with a spouse supersedes all others. It must come first, if the marriage is to succeed.

■ CLEAVE

Leaving alone does not a happy marriage make. There are many who leave the parental home, not so much to join a mate, but to flee unhappy home conditions.

It doesn’t take long in the new environment to prove the old adage, “Wherever you go you take yourself with you.” Those who seek in marriage a refuge from former problems soon discover that the same problems follow them into the married state.

The marital relationship, being an outgrowth of love, calls for commitments. These must be deep and personal commitments. They must last as long as life itself—“until death do us part.”

Not only must the couple adhere to one another by commitment, but equally important, by affection. As actions speak louder than words, so a hug or an arm around the shoulder, together with the whispered, “I love you,” goes a long way toward firmly cementing a marital relationship.

To be alert to express one’s love for one’s mate in countless little ways is but to maintain the courtship which originally produced the union.

■ ONE FLESH

“And they shall be one flesh.” Of the three Biblical principles for marriage, this one is by far the most difficult. It involves losing your own identity by building a new one together with your spouse.

Each of us naturally treasures our individuality. Yet, in the bonds of matrimony, two different individuals must be blended as one. In doing so, they each must surrender a certain amount of their own personality to completely mesh as a new person.

Although the husband is Scripturally given headship in the house, this does not mean that the oneness of marriage is a simple adaptation to his ways. Rather, it is built by consensus through the continuous dialog of both partners.

Once a line of action has been agreed upon, it now becomes the part of both husband and wife to carry out their plans, not viewing them as a compromise to keep their mate happy. It is thus by the dropping of “my plans” and “your plans” in favor of “our plans” that husband and wife truly become “one flesh.”

THREE SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLES

“Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.” - Matthew 16:24

As Genesis 2:24 lays down the three principles which govern the relationship between man and woman in the Christian marriage, so this text outlines the three principles which govern the relationship between the Christian and Christ, his heavenly bridegroom.

It is interesting to note the similarity between these two set of principles. One is virtually the spiritual copy of the other.

■ DENYING SELF

To deny self is to renounce self will, to forsake our opinions by seeking Christ's opinions. The willingness to have another mold our life is a sacrifice of the first degree.

When Jesus consecrated his life to God, his attitude was foretold by the Psalmist:

"I delight to do thy will, O my god: yea, thy law is with my heart."- Psalm 40:8

The testimony of how completely he carried out this desire is expressed in Jesus' own words in John 5:19 –

"Verily, verily I say unto you, the Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do, for whatsoever things he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise."

It is this same complete surrender of personal will which is demanded of the Christian. Thus he "leaves his father's house," departing from the life that is behind him and venturing forth into the exciting drama of a new life with Christ.

TAKE UP HIS CROSS

If any one symbol identifies the life of Jesus of Nazareth, it is the cross.

How quickly we recognize a Christian church by the presence of a simple cross. "The old rugged cross" becomes a treasured symbol, not because of the cruelty there suffered, but because of the personal sacrifice which was willing to yield to such a cruel death on behalf of others.

"For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die: But God commendeth his love toward us, in that. While we were yet sinner, Christ dies for us." –

If the Christian is to follow Christ, he likewise must bear his cross—turning his trials, difficulties and disappointments into "His appointments"—thus becoming more closely joined to his prospective Bridegroom.

It is thus that he "cleaves" to his Master, by becoming involved in the same life-style, by training to share in the same work of sin-removal. Jesus phrased it succinctly in Matthew 10:38—

"And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me."

AND FOLLOW ME

Just as the marriage partners are to become "one flesh" by dropping their own plans for new joint ones; so the Christian becomes "one" with his Lord by dropping his own plans for new ones.

Not only must the Christian leave his former paths, but he must seek the ones his new Bridegroom would have him take. Jesus told a parable about a man who had an unclean spirit. The man swept out the evil spirit, but did not replace the remaining vacuum. Soon he returned with seven companions. Jesus summarized his story in Matthew 12:45—

"And the last state of that man is worse than the first."

For the Christian to follow Christ, he must learn of Christ. He must study to know who he is and how he operates. This brings about an entire renovation of the mind. And as he copies this new mind, he becomes "one"—not "one flesh," but "one spirit"—with his heavenly Bridegroom. The Apostle Paul states it well in Romans 12:2—

"And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God."

GOD'S MARRIAGE VOWS

"I will betroth thee unto me forever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in lovingkindness, and in mercies, I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness: and thou shalt know the Lord." – Hosea 2:19, 20

As Jesus and his Church are described as Bride and Bridegroom in the New Testament, so in the Old Testament, marriage is used as a picture of the relationship between God and Israel.

An allegorical dimension is added to this picture in the story of the prophet Hosea. Under the Lord's direction, Hosea marries a prostitute. After the birth of their first son, Jezreel, she resumes her relationships with other men, giving birth to two additional children. Hosea is then instructed to once again bring her back into the marriage union.

As the prophet carries out the Lord's directions, he graphically illustrates the love and care which God has for ancient Israel, despite their unfaithfulness, in following after a number of idols.

It is in the context of this expression of God's eternal pledge of faithfulness to Israel, regardless of their straying, that we find the text at the head of this article. In a practical sense, it forms an outline of ideals for personal marriages as well.

FOR EVER

"Until death do us part" has traditionally been an element of marriage vows. It is this life-long commitment that makes marriage the sacred institution it is.

Today, the popularity of divorce and the casual acceptance of "live-in" relationships have deeply eroded the permanence of the marital contract. The roles of "husband" and "wife" are considered experimental. Break-ups are thus facilitated, encouraging the concept that marriage is not necessarily a life-long proposition.

However, it was not so from the beginning! Notice the discussion between Jesus and the Pharisees on this very topic in Matthew 19:3-9:

"The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female. And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. They say unto him, Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away? He saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives; but from the beginning it was not so. And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery."

It is the inclusion of such expressions as "for richer or for poorer, for better of for worse" that give assurance to both spouses that their mate has pledged to make their union a lasting one.

IN RIGHTEOUSNESS

The righteousness, or uprightness, in which the marriage union is entered is the best guarantee for the health and happiness of that union. It is this righteousness that is the pledge of the honesty and sincerity of the commitments which are made.

It is this principle that gives the assurance to each mate that the motivation behind the marriage is really love, and not security, or flight from an unhappy environment, or even mere physical attraction.

This attitude also pledges that the commitments being undertaken will not be esteemed lightly, but truly as vows. As the wise man has wisely written:

"Better it is that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay." – Ecclesiastes 5:5

IN JUDGMENT

Although true marriage is an outgrowth of love, and love is the strongest of all emotions, the entrance into marriage is more than an emotional decision—it should be guided by judgment.

Marriages, particularly first marriages, generally start in the early years of life when physical and sexual attractions are disproportionately strong. However, as implied by the expression, "Beauty is only skin deep," it is a weak glue with which to join two different personalities, and will soon give way under the strains of daily living.

Strong and happy marriages begin with the removal of the rose-colored glasses of emotional attraction, and mutually and objectively discussing each others' outlooks on life. It is in the comparison of likes and dislikes, personal feelings and reactions, goals and aims, that "judgment" takes over.

Only too frequently the incompatibilities discovered in these courtship dialogs are papered over with the feeling that our prospective mate will change after marriage. This may be true. It also may not be true. Acceptance of the other must be as they are, even if change does not take place.

For Christian marriages, the Apostle Paul adds another restriction—"only in the Lord." (1 Corinthians 7:39) This New Testament counsel is paralleled by the Old Testament command of God to the Jewish people to only marry within their faith.

But Paul's advice is more than just for Christians to marry Christians. It covers the degree and intensity of their individual Christian commitments as well. Once again, true compatibility must be as much or even more so, on the spiritual level than on the earthly. To be less would be to be "unequally yoked." (2 Corinthians 6:14)

IN LOVINGKINDNESS

Love is not only the foundation upon which marriages are built, it is also the power supply that keeps them running. The bridging of natural incompatibilities, the necessary subjection of one's preferences to those of one's mate, the merging of two differently raised individuals into a new unit, would be nearly impossible without the alchemy of love.

During courtship this love is freely expressed. It is part of the wooing process, but as the wedding passes into history, and the bride becomes a wife, it is natural for routine to set in. With this routine comes an equally natural casualness that begins to take the services of each other for granted. Even ordinary expressions of politeness—the "pleases" and "thank you's" of life—become less frequent.

Too frequently the plain is:

"Do you love me or do you not;
You told me once, but I forgot."

How important is the frequent sincere reiteration of the three magic words, "I love you." Even more important is the demonstration of this affection with a kiss or an embrace. Still more important are the little things that mean a lot—the unexpected gift or surprise compliment. Perhaps most important is the showing of this tender love by serving one another joyfully and doing things for and with each other.

IN MERCIES

"To err is human." Any two people living together 24 hours a day can certainly attest to the truth of this adage. In the steady grind of daily living, it is impossible for any of us in our fallen state to always do as we should, or even as we would.

It is these slip-ups which become so irritating in a home situation. This is even more aggravated by the fact that we each have different areas of weakness. Thus we tend to fall repeatedly in the same things. The appearance to our mate is often that we are not trying to do better.

Here is where the "mercies" of the marriage vows must play their part. Our judgments of our spouses must be tempered by our love for them. Even as Paul says that "love believes all things," so must each mate believe in his partner's desire to do better.

The lesson of Hosea is especially strong here. God was demonstrating his willingness to take back Israel even though she had "gone whoring after false gods." His displeasure was evident. There was chastisement, but there was, finally, forgiveness.

In the far lesser hurts that accompany most marriages, is not the pattern well established—forgive? It is often helpful to realize that in each area where we are displeased by our marriage partner, they are probably equally displeased with us. Our own need for compassion and forgiveness should give great incentive to be more forgiving to our spouses.

IN FAITHFULNESS

This quality is also well demonstrated in the story of Hosea. His wife, Gomer, was far from faithful. Both before and during her marriage she had run after other men. Yet Hosea was instructed to receive her back. Likewise, Israel, whom Gomer pictured, was repeatedly unfaithful to God. Yet God assured her that, despite her unfaithfulness, he would remain faithful to her and receive her back.

This faithfulness is well expressed in traditional marriage vows by the words, "forsaking all others." Even though one marriage partner may not fulfill all the needs of the other, yet they must become the center and focal point of each other's lives.

Neither parent, nor child, nor the most intimate of confidants can supersede the positions of one's mate. If no other person can become number one, certainly the same must be said of home, or job, or hobby, or any other interest.

The Apostle Paul implies that one's spouse becomes a first mortgage on one's thought time, even in religious matters. The Apostle cautions:

"He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord. But he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife." – 1 Corinthians 7:32, 33

It is for this very reason that he recommends that the Christian consider well the option of remaining single, devoting all his energies to his religious pursuits. Thus he summarizes his discussion on Christian marriage with these words:

"So then he that giveth her in marriage doeth well; but he that giveth her not in marriage doeth better." – 1 Corinthians 7:38

THOU SHALT KNOW THE LORD

In the Hosea illustration, the husband in this prophecy was the Lord. Thus, the text could equally well be rendered, "and thou shall know thy husband." With equal force, one might say, "and thou shall know thy wife."

It is in the regular living of daily life that people really get to know each other. The emergency episodes, the decision-making discussions, show us insights of one another obtainable in no other way. It is this mutual intimate knowledge that enables a couple to merge into a new family unit—to "become one flesh."

It is no coincidence that the euphemism the Bible uses for marital cohabitation is taken from this same word—"And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived." (Genesis 4:1) Every intimate contact, whether of the body in marital union or of the mind in the sharing of innermost feelings, brings a deeper knowledge of the mate.

This knowledge should be productive knowledge. It should produce a more tender, more understanding, more compassionate relationship. The Apostle Peter expresses it thus:

"Likewise ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honor unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers be not hindered."
– 1 Peter 3:7

However, while treating Hosea's expression as we have, it remains also true that a good Christian marriage, righteously entered into and faithfully carried out, will also help us to "know the Lord."

THE QUESTION OF HEADSHIP

"Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the savior of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it." – Ephesians 5:22-25

"Nevertheless, let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband." – Ephesians 5:33

"God did not take Eve from Adam's foot, that he should rule over her; nor did he take her from Adam's head, that she should rule over him; but from his side, close to his heart, and under his arm for his protective care." – Old Jewish Proverb

The sensibilities of twentieth century men and women are more attracted to the Jewish proverb than to the Bible. But the old Jewish proverb is just an old Jewish proverb; and the Bible is the Bible—the authoritative Word of God. What, then, are the Scriptural roles assigned to husbands and wives in the marital relationship.

The entire concept of submission is treated extensively in the first epistle of Peter. In chapter 2, verse 13, he begins with the submission of the Christian to government:

"Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well."

That this was not meant to be a universal rule is indicated by the same apostle's words in Acts 4:19 when, threatened with civil punishment for preaching God's word, he with John retorted:

"Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye."

Then, in verse 18, Peter begins to extend this doctrine to masters and slaves. In our society, we might substitute employers and employees.

"Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also the froward. For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully."

Here the submission was to be irrespective of civil rights—given as freely to the gentle masters as to the forward, or cruel ones. Yet the Apostle Paul writes the entire epistle of Philemon to plead for leniency for the runaway slave, Onesimus.

Peter then turns his attention to husbands and wives in chapter 3, verses one through seven. We will only quote the first of these verses:

"Likewise [in the same manner as slaves were to be subject to their masters], ye wives be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation [conduct] of the wives."

Illustrating the submission of the wife to the husband, Peter cites the case of Sarah and Abraham in verse 6:

"Even as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord: whose daughters ye are, as long as ye do well, and are not afraid with any amazement."

Yet this same Sarah, who is cited as the example of the wife submitting to her husband, strongly contended with him to exile her handmaid, Hagar, and her son, Ishmael, whom she had borne to Abraham. God intervened on the side of Sarah, saying:

"Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman, in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called." -- Genesis 21:12

Therefore the headship of Abraham was not to be dictatorial, but considerate of, and even condescending to, the opinions of his wife, Sarah. This is further highlighted by the conclusion of Peter's discussion of male and female roles.

"Likewise, [still discussing submission], ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honor unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered." – 1 Peter 3:7

While exercising a headship role, the husband was instructed to be cognizant of the wife's weaker position, seeking to give honor and consideration to her views in a matter. As they were "heirs together," so the ways in which they would work out their heirship would be jointly.

The penalty for the husband's not doing so was that his prayers would be hindered. The relationship between prayer and our Christian life is well illustrated in the "Lord's Prayer:"

“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”
– Matthew 6:12

The treatment we give others is the treatment we are to expect of God. If a husband is not sympathetic to his wife's pleas, his prayers for compassion from the heavenly Father will be hindered. Therefore, it is to the husband's advantage to treat his wife with the same compassionate concern which he would appreciate from the one to whom he is to be in subjection—the Almighty Creator of the Universe.

Returning to Pete's epistle, he concludes his discourse of submission with 1 Peter 3:8—

"Finally, be all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous."

Every individual should be in subjection to every other individual. This is only the natural extension of the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

HUSBAND-PHOBIA

Before leaving this theme, let us take one last look at the final phrase of Ephesians 5:33—

"[Let] the wife see that she reverence her husband."

The Greek word translated "reverence" in this text is phobeo. The wife is to have "husband-phobia." The word does contain the thought of alarm, or a thing to be feared. However, it also conveys the thought of "reverence" and is usually better so translated when referring to God.

But how should a wife have a "phobia" of her husband? We would suggest that the fear, or phobia, here described is not of the person of her husband, but of his role. The text conveys the thought of the high respect the wife should hold for her husband's position of headship. He represents the office of Christ, even as the wife represents the church.

Not only is the wife to have a fear of not keeping her proper position in the marital relationship, but the husband must have an equally proper fear of not properly exercising his role, as shown in the forefront of the same verse.

The proper balance of the roles of husband and wife is well indicated by God's own words in creating the first woman:

"And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a help meet for him." – Genesis 2:18

The Hebrew word translated "meet" means "a counterpart." In other words, she is complete in her husband, and he is complete in his wife—they form a team. How similar once again to God's original design in marriage:

"And they twain shall be one flesh."

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