

When Two Become One Flesh

by Zechariah Schiebout

*How the Gospel Transforms Marriage
Duty into Marriage Beauty*

*Gospel of Grace Church
Springfield, MO
www.gospelofgracechurch.com*

Preface

As always, I have no original thoughts, meaning I am a product of my education, both written and verbal. I am heavily indebted to Nelson D. Kloosterman, one of my seminary professors, whose exegetical methods guide nearly every one of my conclusions; to C.S. Lewis whose pithy chapter on marriage in *Mere Christianity* and whose book, *Four Loves*, have given rise to the majority of quotes with which I interact in this booklet, and have provided me, since the time I first read them 15 years ago while yet a non-Christian, a theological basis for marriage which, until I began writing about marriage, I never knew I had; and to Dr. Timothy Keller whose application of the gospel to marriage I have happily adopted as my own. His biblical insights, more than any other's, permeate my thought: without them this booklet would probably be as long, but only one-tenth as useful (presuming, of course, which is usually a bad idea, it's useful).

But having stood among the books and lectures of insightful theologians, I must confess my primary instruction on marriage has come from my dear parents, Bruce and Marla, whose 35 years of marriage, and counting, through good times and bad, riches and poverty, health and sickness, better and worse, has been for me the greatest teacher, though for them, I'm sure, an unwitting one, and certainly probably not one they expected or would pride themselves in. I suspect all Christian parents pray their children forget most of the married life they observed while growing up, or at least the worst of it, and especially those years the parents were trying to figure out how marriage works, and simultaneously how children work, or don't work, as is usually the case. But for me, observing two Christian parents sin, repent, and forgive one another, with never an indication that either was departing the marriage, has been an education of inestimable value. It is one thing to read about marital commitment, another to believe in it, and yet another to experience, first hand, in living color, what it means for two people to take the promise, "Till death do we part" seriously.

And to my wife of 7 years, barely past newlywed status, you surpass them all, by far.

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Introduction

Marriage has always been one of Satan's primary battlegrounds in his war against the Triune God. Ask Lot and Abraham about same-sex marriage in Sodom¹—I doubt they thought their day better than ours, and probably it wasn't.² Or ask Adam and Eve. As they drove away from the Garden of Eden with cherubim and flaming sword flashing in the rear-view mirror, their marriage damaged by sin, I doubt Adam bragged-up his protective, Christ-like love and Eve her servant-hearted submissiveness. Through the first married couple, and Adam in particular, sin entered the world,³ and the noise echoes loudly through time's corridor, leaving no marriage unaffected. The state of marriage since remains consistent: a man and woman enter marriage with an irrevocable sign hanging over the threshold: "Brokenness and sin live here, haughtily ever after."

Marriage is a funny thing. Idolize it and it will crush you; neglect it and it will die. If you look to your spouse to give you what only God can—self-worth, validity, strength, a reason to live—you become empty and hollow. And if you take your spouse for granted, treating them with indifference and neglect, your marriage will atrophy, and you along with it. Marriage can lead to exquisite heights, and it can walk us into the valley of the shadow of gloom; it can be a magnificent blessing or a grand bother. It has the power to restore the ruined and ruin the robust; to strengthen the downcast and weaken the strong; to bolster the insecure and stagger the secure. Marriage is no benign relationship: it drives you to insanity or to holiness, to joy through humble repentance or to despair through pride, to madness or to God, but it always drives, and is driving, you somewhere. There are no parked spouses on the roadway of matrimony.

In a March 31, 2008 article entitled "New Marriage and Divorce Statistics Released", the Barna Group reported 78% of American adults have been married at least once, and roughly one-third of all Americans who married have experienced at least one divorce. Marriage is normal, unsurprisingly, but so is divorce. The researchers commented:

There no longer seems to be much of a stigma attached to divorce; it is now seen as an unavoidable rite of passage...*Interviews with young adults suggest that they want their initial marriage to last, but are not particularly optimistic about that possibility.* There is also evidence that many young people are moving toward embracing the idea of serial

¹ Genesis 19:4-7.

² Until, in a future society, someone replaces "to Sodomize" with "to Americanize", we may, tongue-in-cheek, assume America no worse than Sodom.

³ Romans 5:12; 1 Timothy 2:14.

marriage, in which a person gets married two or three times, seeking a different partner for each phase of their adult life.⁴

Of particular interest are two observations. First, notice *the move toward serial marriage*. Aware human beings change drastically throughout life, young adults conclude a spouse for one's youth, a spouse for one's mid-life crisis, and a spouse for one's retirement should alleviate the strife of having to love, and be loved by, someone who has changed drastically since the day you married them. Instead of changing the way you love your spouse, you change spouses. The excitement of a new spouse should carry you through the next decade and a half, until they change, and you change, and you change each other for another. There is a certain allure to this, but better yet is *learning to view one's life-long spouse as almost a new spouse with each major season of change*. Stanley Hauerwas comments on this:

Most of the literature that attempts to instruct us about getting along in marriage fails to face up to a fact so clearly true that I have dared to call it Hauerwas's Law. You always marry the wrong person...The point of the law is to suggest the inadequacy of the current assumption that the success or failure of a marriage can be determined by marrying the "right person." Even if you have married the "right person," there is no guarantee that he or she will remain such, for people have a disturbing tendency to change.⁵

Expanding on Hauerwas's insight, Timothy Keller writes:

Hauerwas shows that the quest for a perfectly compatible soul mate is an impossibility...the moment you marry someone, you and your spouse begin to change in profound ways, and you can't know ahead of time what those changes will be...

...Some people are really, *really* the wrong people to marry. But everyone else is still incompatible. All who win through to a good, long-term marriage know what Hauerwas is talking about. Over the years you will go through seasons in which you have to learn to love a person who you didn't marry, who is something of a stranger. You will have to make changes that you don't want to make, and so will your spouse. The journey may eventually take you into a strong, tender, joyful marriage. But it is not because you married the perfectly compatible person. That person doesn't exist.⁶

Said another way, there is no need to divorce the stranger you married to marry another stranger. As spouses mature, they change enough so as to

⁴ www.barna.org/barna-update/article/15-familykids/42-new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released (italics mine).

⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, *Sex and Politics: Bertrand Russell and "Human Sexuality."* *Christian Century*, April 19, 1978; pp. 417-422. Copyright by The Christian Century Foundation: www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1797.

⁶ Timothy Keller (with Kathy Keller), *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*. NY: Dutton, 2011; pp. 38-39.

become very different people than they were years earlier. The challenge, then, is not finding a stranger to love, but learning to love the stranger to whom you find yourself married for life.

Second (from the Barna Group quote), notice *the doubts with which young adults approach marriage*. Desirous of life-long marriage, they doubt its feasibility. It is no wonder, then, serial marriage—marriage with explicit expectation of divorce—is one desensitization pill young adults swallow to brace themselves for the pain of seemingly inexorable divorce, and it is no wonder cohabitation—a sort of make-believe marriage absent life-long commitment—has become commonplace, the number of cohabiting couples in the U.S. rising from 439,000 in 1960 to 6,799,000 in 2008.⁷ Increasingly, cohabitation does not merely *precede* marriage as a sort of “test drive” for the relationship, but replaces it. More and more couples cohabit with no explicit intention of marrying; they view cohabitation as a long-term alternative to marriage.

Cohabitation: a viable substitute for marriage?

What’s the big deal about cohabitation? In addition to running contrary to the biblical principles of sexual purity and the nature of marriage, cohabitation, statistically, leaves much to be desired. Consider a digest of conclusions from researchers:

1. Cohabitors, especially women, are more likely to be physically and verbally abused by their partner than those who date.⁸
2. Cohabitors divorce more frequently, and quicker, than those who marry first without cohabitation.
3. Cohabitors are less sexually faithful to their partners than are married spouses to each other.
4. Cohabitors, often driven to cohabitation by perceived benefits of sexual availability, and though statistically more sexually active than marrieds, are less happy sexually than married couples.
5. Since cohabiters live in a perpetual state of “availability”, always willing to terminate a current relationship for the sake of a better prospect, the more committed cohabiter is generally unhappy, depressed, regretful, and feels more insecure and less in control of his/her life.
6. Married men and women are unanimously better off physically and psychologically than the unwed, and most often better off financially.

⁷ *The State of Our Unions: Marriage in America 2009*, p. 83. Copyright 2009 by the National Marriage Project and the Institute for American Values: www.virginia.edu/marriageproject/pdfs/Union_11_25_09.pdf.

⁸ The first six conclusions are drawn from Anne-Marie Ambert’s, *Cohabitation and Marriage: How are they related*, (2005). The Vanier Institute of the Family: www.vifamily.ca/sites/default/files/cohabitation_and_marriage.pdf.

7. “Through contributing to unwed births and lone-parent families, cohabitation has negative effects on child wellbeing.”⁹

Probably unwittingly, cohabiting singles striving to protect themselves from bad marriages apply a remedy worse than the illness. If a husband abandons or abuses his wife, there are, in most cases, laws such as distribution of wealth which give her rights to his current wealth and future income. But if a cohabiting boyfriend abandons or abuses his girlfriend, there are no laws binding him to hand her a portion of his wealth or future income. In other words, because “non marital cohabitation remains distinctive in that no specific procedures exist for getting into it, and none for getting out”,¹⁰ cohabiters enter, without protection, a relationship so intimate they can be severely damaged for life with very little recourse. Cohabiters are left, literally, to themselves. For this reason alone, they are, for the most part, in a more vulnerable and potentially dangerous situation than marrieds, especially women, and especially cohabiting women who quit their jobs or have children.

Moreover, because cohabitation requires no formal commitment, cohabiting couples usually struggle to establish an identity (*what* are we?), and as a result don't know the *purpose* of the relationship (*why* are we together?), or are embarrassed to admit the purpose (convenient sex; a remedy for insecurity or loneliness), and they usually don't know how much energy they should put into conflict resolution (should we work it out or go our separate ways). Consequently, cohabiting couples waste much of their time in confusion and conflict. In marriage, at least in word, and usually initially though it may fade, two people are committed to each other for the long haul, and thus will, if they take vows seriously, exert every effort to work through difficulties. In cohabitation, according to the nature of the beast, two people are committed to each other for so long as the least committed one pleases, which usually means for so long as the other person benefits them. This makes it rather hard, if not impossible, to establish a stable relationship. *Availability*, something at least one cohabiter treasures, is a forbidden adverb in marriage for the reason that availability means termination lays, every moment, just around the bend, preventing the cohabiters, no matter what they say, from *really* investing themselves in each other. Feigned as a strength, research taken from the lips of cohabiters themselves suggests availability—lack of commitment—is its greatest weakness. Think about it: why would anyone genuinely, and tirelessly, pour themselves into a partner who may, next week, be in the bed of

⁹ David Popenoe, *Cohabitation, Marriage and Child Wellbeing: A Cross-National Perspective*, p. 16. Copyright 2008 by the National Marriage Project: www.virginia.edu/marriageproject/pdfs/NMP2008CohabitationReport.pdf.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 12.

another, and who may, next month, be under the roof of another? Consider 3 quotes from cohabiters, and the researcher's trenchant comment afterwards:

"No, I don't know if I'll get married [to the woman he lives with]. Eventually, probably, but I am not yet ready for this. Right now I am not even sure that she's the right woman for me so that I prefer to take it easy; I have a wait-and-see attitude at this point." [At the follow-up interview two years later, this couple had separated. He was casual about it, but the woman was very upset.]

"I have lived with two different guys and that's it! No more! It's always the same thing: we just play at being married because they don't want to do anything except play. They couldn't get married because...the usual line is 'I'm not ready for such a commitment.'"

"I live with my boyfriend and I really like it for now but I worry about the future. I am 23 and want to get married one day but the way I see it, he likes it just fine the way it is and won't want to commit himself to something more serious."

What these quotes (with the recurring themes of "play" and lack of commitment) well illustrate is another advantage that cohabitation has over marriage for *one* of the partners: It can serve to delay commitment and give a longer time lead during which to find a better alternative. Naturally, the more committed partner is at a disadvantage. Many cohabiters, perhaps more male than female, remain in a permanent state of availability. In other words, they are still "playing the field" while benefiting from economic advantages, companionship, and sexuality.¹¹

One more testimony should suffice to alarm those yet optimistic about cohabitation as a viable alternative to dating or marriage:

Right now I'd rate myself as being fairly unhappy and it's because I have found out that my boyfriend I live with lives with me just so that he can have sex that he knows is safe. He does love me some you know but his kind of love is mainly sexual. That means that I have wasted the past 18 months of my life that I could have better spent looking for a better guy and also one that would have accepted me as a whole person and not just as a sex machine.¹²

Because cohabiters enter the relationship for mainly self-centered reasons, the relationship is, or soon becomes, each partner using the other for what they can get out of them. Afraid of being used, they exchange the *possibility* of being used in marriage for the *guarantee* of being used in cohabitation.

¹¹ Anne-Marie Ambert, *Cohabitation and Marriage: How are they related*, p. 14 (2005). The Vanier Institute of the Family:
www.vifamily.ca/sites/default/files/cohabitation_and_marriage.pdf.

¹² *Ibid*; p. 12.

Cohabitation: why its popularity?

Researchers posit two primary reasons for the rise of cohabitation: the sexual revolution of the 1960's, and the ugliness of divorce. The first reason needs little explanation: cohabitation does indeed allow two, uncommitted people to use each other for sex with amazing convenience. The second reason, though, is worth further consideration. Though cohabitation causes more problems than it solves, observant adults, cohabiters especially, know, likely through research but definitely through personal observation, the horrendous effects of divorce emotionally, physically, and financially. Therefore, if divorce devastates, and the sure way to avoid divorce is by avoiding marriage, then elementary logic suggests the way to prevent the pain of divorce, something all human beings prefer to do, is to find an alternative to marriage. Insert cohabitation; alternative found; problem solved, or so we thought. For a brief moment, assuming you are not a fan of cohabitation, sympathize with the logic for a moment, for until you are honest about the realities and pains of divorce, you cannot be of much use to those who cohabit in order to avoid it.

Marriage is the making of two into one, the Siamese-ing of consenting adults, the uniting of two lives so closely that hurting one's spouse is hurting oneself, and loving one's spouse is loving oneself. Our spouse's tears become our tears; when they cry, we taste the salt. And their joys become our joys; when they succeed, we celebrate. The joys double in intensity, and so do the sorrows. Whatever we say about marriage, it is no ordinary institution in which men and women may come and go as they please unaffected. When a man and woman say, "I do", their lives impact each other permanently and powerfully, and no divorce, not even an amiable one, can restore a spouse to pre-nuptial condition. If the two who became one are ripped apart into two by divorce, life-long brokenness results:

Christianity teaches that marriage is for life...[Churches] all regard divorce as something like cutting up a living body, as a kind of surgical operation. Some of them think the operation so violent that it cannot be done at all; others admit it as a desperate remedy in extreme cases. They are all agreed that it is more like having both your legs cut off than it is like dissolving a business partnership or even deserting a regiment. What they all disagree with is the modern view that it is a simple readjustment of partners, to be made whenever people feel they are no longer in love with one another, or when either of them falls in love with someone else.¹³

The sores of divorce never heal entirely, and were probably never meant to. God designed marriage for life, and by His grace has told us so. But Bible aside for a moment (if you will allow me), spouses torn apart by divorce, if they are honest, and most are, will testify with tears in their eyes that

¹³ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. NY: HarperCollins, 2001; p. 105.

whoever designed marriage designed it to be permanent. The deafening silence of loneliness, the intense pain of rejection, the unbearable feelings of worthlessness brought on by a spouse walking out the door for the last time—the *last* time—and the depressing reality that someone who once could not live without you now can, and wants to, and will, and will be better off because of it (or so they told you)—these overwhelming feelings trumpet from Mt. Sinai's pinnacle the unchangeable decree that God designed marriage for life. Acquaintances come and go, and so do friends and children, but spouses come, and if they go, no matter the immediate relief their going may bring, they take with them the portion of our heart we gave them. They take with them an irreplaceable piece of ourselves, a piece painfully lost, and a piece, if we are Christians, which we will not receive back until Jesus returns.

This is the reality of divorce, which, if pondered long enough, should leave even the most stalwart defenders of biblical marriage sympathetic toward, though not in any way approving of, those on a quest for an alternative to marriage. To be sure, there isn't a viable alternative, or at least not a God-glorifying one, but in a world where purple bruises, alimony, divorce lawyers, merciless lawsuits, and, worst of all, hoards of confused and damaged children testify to the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth that marriage can go drastically wrong, it is not hard to understand why one generation, and another, of young adults have thrown the baby of God's design for marriage out with the bathwater of their parents' miserable marriages. If you are such a young adult, I encourage you to keep reading. Your marriage does not have to end in divorce, and, you need not enter marriage with the fear, much less the expectation, that it will fail.

My aim in this booklet is to apply the gospel to marriage in such a way that, with much patience and time, marital duty will become marital beauty, and marital demand marital delight. When two sinful Christians focus their attention more on the gospel of Christ, than on the goodness, or gall, of themselves, the marriage, by God's grace, becomes relationally and spiritually beautiful. My prayer, then, is that, through the gospel, the only true and living God who created marriage will impress upon each Christian spouse His design for marriage, so that each may experience the joy, yes the *joy*, of persevering through health and sickness, riches and poverty, good times and bad times, youth and old age, with the same spouse, and, in so doing, may taste even a morsel of God's covenant-keeping love toward us, through our good works and sin-sickness, our successes and failures, our rejoicing and suffering, till death do we part with this body and enter the fullness of His presence. May God use this brief exposition of His Word to tutor those desiring marriage; bolster those doubting their marriage; prod the indifferent; awaken the apathetic; re-invigorate the cynical; enliven the

worn-out; assure the skeptical; and further nurture those marriages which have been blossoming for decades.

This booklet addresses, first and foremost, Christian marriages. This does not mean, however, that non-Christians should stop reading. The issues both Christians and non-Christians face in marriage are largely the same, so if you don't believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you will probably find the problems presented in this booklet relevant to your marriage. As you read, please consider whether the gospel, the substitutionary work of Jesus Christ on the Cross, provides you powerful answers for your own marriage, or at least makes you curious about Christ. As a minister of the gospel, I cannot resist telling you, my non-Christian friends, the primary problem in your marriage is the sin of unbelief, which, you may be surprised to hear, *is the exact same primary problem in every Christian marriage*, but, already, I am getting ahead of myself.

The booklet follows the following outline:

1. The Covenant of Marriage: A Committed Relationship
2. The Self-Sacrifice of Marriage: A Humbling Relationship
3. The Self-Sacrifice of Marriage: A Husband's Love
4. The Self-Sacrifice of Marriage: A Wife's Submission
5. The Purpose of Marriage: An Intentional Relationship
6. The Priority of Marriage: An Exclusive Relationship
7. The Companionship of Marriage: A Friendly Relationship
8. The Intimacy of Marriage: A Physical Relationship
9. The Mystery of Marriage: A Christ-Exalting Relationship

The Covenant of Marriage

A Committed Relationship

In his book, *When Sinners Say "I Do"*, Dave Harvey depicts a scene in which the ever familiar, and usually meaningless, comment made by the wedding officiant—"If there be any here who can give a reason why this man and woman should not be joined, speak now or forever hold your peace"—elicited an earnest and sincere response from an attendee: "How do you know? I mean no disrespect, but how do you know—I mean, really know—that this marriage is going to work?" Then with voice and eyes lowered, the attendee slowly sputtered, "How...how can anyone know?" Dave Harvey offers insightful thoughts about how some in attendance would answer the question:

They're in love—love can conquer anything, thought the maid of honor.

Compatibility is the key. This marriage is a lock, thought a mutual friend.

The bride and groom's former youth pastor, having known both families for years, said to himself, *It all comes down to parenting. These kids will go the distance because they've come from good families.*

Uncle Bob, the CPA, straightened his tie and chuckled to himself. *Do you have any idea what their stock portfolio is going to look like in a few years, buddy? Good financial planning eliminates the single biggest stressor to healthy marriages.*

They've read every marriage book out there—what else do they need to know? marveled the best man.¹⁴

What would you say? What do you believe the right answer is? How can you know marriage—*your* marriage—is going to work? Or, put another way, what is the basis or foundation of marriage, without which your marriage will topple over in a stiff breeze, but if you have it you can stand fast in a tornado? Let's begin answering the question by exposing three counterfeit foundations which look and feel so much like the real thing they frequently dupe married couples:

1. *Personal advantage.* Many enter marriage upon the false foundation of personal advantage: each spouse marries for what they can get out of the other. Such marriages appear normal so long as each spouse provides the other with relational benefits, but the moment the benefits cease, the marriage ends. For example, if a woman with no income-earning potential marries a financially stable man in order to partake of the luxuries and comforts wealth affords, the marriage is based on his ability to retain copious riches. Therefore, if the husband should cease retaining

¹⁴ Dave Harvey, *When Sinners Say "I Do."* Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2007; pp. 18-19.

or procuring abundant wealth, the wife divorces. Or if a socially awkward man marries a woman of high social standing in order to gain for himself acceptance with society's upper echelon, the marriage is based on social status. Therefore, if the wife loses her social status, or if, over the course of time, the husband attains a high social status independent of his wife, the husband needs not his wife and divorces. In each of these examples personal, self-centered advantage is the foundation of marriage, and when that foundation erodes, the marriage erodes with it.

2. *Sympathy.* Some partners marry because they feel sorry for the other. Childhood abuse, depression, poverty, loneliness or neediness naturally tug at the human heart, and therefore entering into marriage out of sympathy for someone ailing from these circumstances is tempting. However, though sympathy toward a partner may accompany marriage, if sympathy forms the basis of marriage, the marriage ends when the pain of childhood abuse is cured, when the depression assuages, when the poverty vanishes, when the loneliness gives way to companionship, or when the needs have been met. If you marry someone because you feel sorry for them, then when you have alleviated their particular life-situation which caused your sympathy, your sympathy dissipates, and the marriage evaporates into thin air. Worse yet, if you marry someone because you feel sorry for them, and despite your best efforts they remain damaged from abuse, depressed, poor, lonely, or needy, then you will feel like a worthless, inadequate spouse because deep down inside you know you are not enough for them. Sympathy may accompany marriage, but it cannot be the foundation of a healthy marriage.
3. *The feeling of being in love.* Feelings are funny, and usually funnier in the presence of Mr. or Miss Right. The feeling of being in love produces inside us a quasi-divine glow, an illusion of immortal perfection, a sensation of praiseworthiness so sublime we feel as though all creation must, or surely ought to, worship the emotional "high" of our love-relationship. But the Solar System remains heliocentric, and the feeling of being in love, should it lead into marriage, gives way to roommate squabbles (who gets the fluffy pillow), sordid smells (bath-fan failure), bad manners (position of the toilet seat and credit card bills: both belong down), and times of emotional loneliness (sitting on the same couch, yet feeling desperately alone). C.S. Lewis explains:

Being in love is a good thing, but it is not the best thing..You cannot make it the basis of a whole life. It is a noble feeling, but it is still a feeling. Now no feeling can be relied on to last in its full intensity, or even to last at all...feelings come and go. And in fact, whatever people say, the state called 'being in love' usually does not last. If the old fairy-tale ending 'They lived happily ever after' is taken to mean 'They felt for the next fifty years exactly as they felt the day before they were married', then it says what probably never was nor ever would be true, and would be highly undesirable if it were. Who could bear to live in that

excitement for even five years? What would become of your work, your appetite, your sleep, your friendships? But, of course, ceasing to be ‘in love’ need not mean ceasing to love. Love in this second sense—love as distinct from ‘being in love’—is not merely a feeling. It is a deep unity...reinforced by (in Christian marriages) the grace which both partners ask, and receive, from God. They can have this love for each other even at those moments when they do not like each other...They can retain this love even when each would easily, if they allowed themselves, be ‘in love’ with someone else.¹⁵

The feeling of being in love may, and probably should, accompany us to the marriage altar, but it cannot sustain the marriage after we leave the altar.

Please note that many (most?) Christian marriages commence upon a foundation of personal advantage, sympathy, the feeling of being in love, or other sandy choices. However, marriages never persevere on these foundations, at least not for long. Sooner or later the personal advantage turns to disadvantage, and other members of the opposite gender appear to offer far more advantage than your current spouse; sooner or later the sympathy dies when it is taken for granted, or the one receiving sympathy tires of being a charity case; and sooner or later the feeling of being in love is replaced with the feeling of being duped (“You never told me you were like this...you falsely advertised”). What are Christian spouses to do the moment they realize they entered marriage on the wrong foundation? Shift to a new foundation. Which foundation? This foundation: the foundation of a *permanent public promise*.

Scary, isn’t it. The spouse of personal advantage nervously twitches at the thought of committing to someone who may not provide them an advantage in the future; the sympathizer cringes at the thought of committing to someone who won’t worship them as God; and the sentimental spouse wonders how a permanent public promise can supply them a more delightful marriage than the feeling of being in love. Ironically, a permanent public promise provides genuine personal advantage, deep sympathy with each other, and exquisite romance. I’ll explain later. For now, let’s explore the permanent public promise of marriage:

1. Marriage as a promise
2. The ways we damage marital promise
3. The cure for the damage
4. Where do we go from here?

Marriage as a promise

A permanent public promise is a *covenant*.¹⁶ A temporary private agreement is a *contract*. Marriage is a covenant not a contract.

¹⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. NY: HarperCollins, 2001; p. 109.

¹⁶ I am heavily indebted to Gary Chapman’s book, *Covenant Marriage*, for this entire section.

There are especially four Bible passages which highlight marriage as a covenant: a permanent public promise:

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and *hold fast* to his wife.

Genesis 2:24

The LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been *faithless*, though she is your companion and your wife by *covenant*.

Malachi 2:14

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and *hold fast* to his wife... What therefore *God has joined together*, let not man separate.

Matthe w 19:5-6

Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and *hold fast* to his wife.

Ephesians 5:31

“Hold fast” is language describing covenant faithfulness,¹⁷ and means to cling or cleave to someone, regardless of the difficulty, as Ruth clung to Naomi and would not let her go.¹⁸ If spouses could be compared to boards, holding fast to one another is like gluing two boards together. Boards glued together, rather than nailed, are joined not merely at a few points, but at every point. To hold fast our spouses means to unite with them financially, relationally, emotionally, physically, psychologically, and spiritually. The lives of married people must converge at every point, even the points where it hurts.

Malachi specifically uses the language of “covenant” to describe marriage. During Malachi’s lifetime (c.450 B.C.), certain Israelite males treated their wives faithlessly—divorcing them in order to marry more attractive women from foreign nations—and the LORD, through Malachi, announced His displeasure with them. The word translated “faithless” (Malachi 2:14) is a technical term describing covenant breaking, and it was applied to the Israelite males. Thus, marriage is the establishment of a covenant, a covenant not to be broken.

To better understand the significance of marriage as a covenant, notice a covenant is composed of at least two parts:

1. *Witnesses*.¹⁹ To establish a covenant you need witnesses, which is why a conventional wedding ceremony has groomsmen and bridesmaids—witnesses. But even in the absence of human witnesses, God declares Himself a witness (Malachi 2:14) and joins the husband and wife together (Matthew 19:6). At the wedding ceremony of Adam and Eve, Adam did not address his jubilee to Eve—“*you* are now bone of my

¹⁷ See Deuteronomy 4:4; 10:20; 11:22; 13:4; 30:20; Joshua 22:5; 23:8.

¹⁸ Ruth 1:14.

¹⁹ Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994; pp. 198-199,239,281.

bones”—but to God, “*This* is now bone of my bones.” Gordon Hugenberger explains the significance:

Surely Adam recognized that God did not need to be informed concerning Eve’s origins. Rather, these words appear to have been intended as a solemn affirmation of his marital commitment, an elliptical way of saying something like this, “I hereby invite you, God, to hold me accountable to treat this woman as part of my own body.”²⁰

A marriage covenant, then, is a public declaration where each spouse tells God, and the entire world, of their life-long commitment to the other. In effect, each spouse invites both God and the witnesses to hold them accountable to their marriage vows. And whether or not we invited God to the ceremony, He was there. He listened to our vows and signed His Name, so to speak, next to “Witness” on our marriage certificate.

2. *Vows.*²¹ When a covenant is made, the parties involved make promises to one another.²² Consider these passages:

When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness; I made *my vow* to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord GOD, and you became mine.

Ezekiel 16:8

So you will be delivered from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her *smooth words*, who forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God.

Proverbs 2:16-17

In the Ezekiel passage, God describes the covenant He made with the Israelites, through Moses, when He brought them out of Egypt. The covenant included a vow from God. In the Proverbs passage, the adulteress established a marriage covenant with her spouse, with God as witness, using “smooth words.” She made a vow, but deceitfully so, for she never intended to keep it. She enticed him through persuasion and promises, only to ruin him:

With much *seductive speech* she persuades him; with her *smooth talk* she compels him.

Proverbs 7:21

Vows accompanied both of these covenants. And the most applicable vow to the covenant of marriage is Adam’s, which he spoke at his wedding:

This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.

²⁰ Ibid; p. 165.

²¹ Ibid; pp. 216-239.

²² Exodus 19:1-8; 24:3-8; Deuteronomy 5:22-27; 26:16-19.

Genesis 2:23

Adam is so enthralled with Eve he announces she is him, or he is her, or something like that. They are so closely united in marriage that his bones and flesh are hers. What does Adam's declaration mean? The next verse explains:

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and *hold fast* to his wife

Genesis 2:24

Marriage vows—promises to hold each other fast—are of the essence of the marriage.

"So what," you say, "What is the big deal about marriage as a covenant, a permanent public promise? I don't see why it matters." Here is why it matters.

The United States is a contract society. We make contractual agreements between private parties to accomplish nearly everything in life, especially in the world of construction. In fact, the construction world is fashioned so solidly upon contracts that the corporation in charge of a building site is called a general *contractor*, and those underneath him are *subcontractors*. If you hire a general contractor to build your house in 6 months time, and he fails to finish accordingly, and to the standard of quality upon which you agreed, late fees and price deductions are the generally accepted solution. This is a contract relationship: each party looks out for their own best interest at the expense of the other party. But in a *covenant* relationship each party seeks the benefit of the other at their own personal expense.

Now apply the covenant/contract distinction to marriage and notice the differences:

1. Contract marriages are behavior *dependent*. They operate on an "If...then" basis: "If you love me perfectly, then I will respect you." Or put another way: "I will love you only at your best, only when you measure up, only when your performance merits approval." By contrast, covenant marriages are behavior *transcendent*. They operate on a "Since...then" basis: "Since I have promised to love you no matter what, then on the basis of that promise I will love you regardless of how you perform." In other words, covenant marriage partners say, "I will love you at your worst, when you don't measure up, when your performance merits disapproval."
2. Contract marriages are primarily a goods and services relationship. The spouses love each other for what they can get out of each other. In a contract marriage, therefore, failure to provide the agreed upon goods and services ruins the marriage. By contrast, covenant marriages are primarily a personal relationship. Spouses love each other for each other, so failure to provide goods and services may hurt a little, but is ultimately

irrelevant. The spouses are just happy to have each other, so as long as the spouse lives, no matter their performance, the marriage persists.

3. In contract marriages, failure results in penalty and condemnation. When a spouse fails, the other produces a quasi-hellish environment in order to make the other spouse suffer the terms of the contract. In covenant marriages, however, failure results in repentance and forgiveness. When a spouse fails, the other forgives because they have been forgiven by God.
4. Contract marriages are motivated by a desire to get something we want. Therefore, when we don't get what we want, we complain endlessly, or we "check out" of the marriage and get what we want elsewhere. Covenant marriages are motivated by the benefit of the other person, motivated by a desire to give the other person what they want. Covenant marriages, then, never fail, for there is always opportunity, to some degree, to serve the other person.
5. Contract marriages are private relationships about which no one else has the right to know. In such marriages, sin and strife run rampant, and each spouse expends his or her energy covering up the mess. If anyone asks how the marriage is going, they are told, "It is none of your business." Covenant marriages, however, are public relationships about which everyone is entitled to know. In such marriages, when difficulty strikes, trusted witnesses (best man, maid of honor) and friends should be allowed to help. Marriage is not a private affair which, if dissolved, has no consequences. Quite the opposite is the case. Marriage is a public relationship, and therefore, if dissolved, many people suffer from its dissolution (children, church members, employers, courts of law, tax payers, family members, friends).

The distinction between contract and covenant marriage may not catch much attention, so let me provoke by saying a contract marriage cannot genuinely grow, and a covenant marriage has the primary tools necessary for growth. If each partner in a marriage has one foot "in" and the other "out", and leans more heavily on the "in" foot when things go well, but more heavily on the "out" foot when things turn ugly, the marriage will die a slow death. But if your marriage is built upon an exclusive, life-long commitment, where each spouse has both feet "in", then you have all the tools necessary to mature your marriage.

Take an example from the realm of employment. If your boss says, "I will never fire you, and I put in writing that whoever replaces me as your boss can never fire you either. You will always have a job at this company for the rest of your life." How would that make you feel? Would you feel distant from your boss, separated from him, cold toward him? Would you say to your boss, "That is cold and insensitive. I want my standing with you to rest on my daily performance, not on a promise." I doubt you would say that. I think, rather, you might hug your boss to death, and show up to work with more zeal and zest than ever before. In this scenario the boss

established a *covenant* with his employee. In the same way, marriages built not on daily performance but on a permanent promise to each other usually comprise happy spouses.

The reason some spouses give for leaving their mate is they don't love them anymore. What they mean is they don't *like* them anymore; they probably never really loved them at all. Love is a commitment; love is a promise; love is a word of guarantee made in public that says, "I'm not afraid to tell the whole world that I love you, and you only, until one of us dies. I want everyone to know that as of right now I am off the market. I intend to spend the rest of my life serving you."

The Bible knows nothing of falling in and out of marital love. You can fall in and out of *like*, but not in and out of *love*. What does this have to do with marriage? Everything. Marital love is not something you *fall* into, as if it were nothing more than an open manhole into which you suddenly, and unexpectedly, find yourself plummeting into. Neither is marital love something you can, just as suddenly and unexpectedly, fall out of. Such teaching prevails in secular understandings of love, but is foreign to the biblical teaching on love.

When you promise someone you will be with them till death do you part, you are entering your spouse into your Blackberry planner 40 years from now. You are making a date 50 years into the future, saying, "I will be right by your side 50 years from now." And the longer you remain committed to each other, the greater the intimacy in your marriage. From the wedding forward, your committed love is the only thing which will sustain your marriage:

Just as it is the crown, and not merely the will to rule, that makes the king, so it is marriage, and not merely your love for each other, that joins you together in the sight of God and man...It is not your love that sustains the marriage, but from now on, the marriage that sustains your love.²³

The ways we damage marital promise

There are countless ways we damage our marital commitment. The most obvious way is divorce, or threatening it. But I suspect most Christian couples damage their commitments in subtler ways—ways unknown even to them. We damage our marital commitments every time we give our spouse the impression that we are committed to them as long as they behave a certain way. Here are several examples:

1. Anytime we speak like we've encountered something unable to be worked through, we damage commitment. For example:
 - a. "We are incompatible. We should have never gotten married."
 - b. "We will never be able to get along with each other. We will continue to argue like this for the rest of our married life."

²³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 43.

- c. “I don’t see any light at the end of the tunnel. I think each of us married the wrong person, and we just have to get used to not getting along.”
2. Anytime we leave a disagreement in a huff, without a verbal, or non-verbal, commitment to work through the problem at a later time, we injure our marital promise.
 3. Anytime a dispute ends with talk of divorce, we functionally divorce our spouses. Divorce is toxic and demeaning; its very mention does serious damage to marriage. I suggest married couples banish it from their vocabulary altogether, lest it pervade your speech and thought life so much that it becomes, though you never meant it to be so, a real possibility for consideration. In the meantime, we might learn a healthy, and humorous, perspective on divorce from Ruth Graham (wife of evangelist Billy Graham):

In 2006 Barbara [Bush; wife of then President George W. Bush] noted that Ruth [Graham] had once been asked whether, as a Christian, she had ever contemplated divorce. Barbara explained, “Her answer, was, ‘Divorce? No. Murder? Yes.’ Added Barbara, ‘I could understand that.’²⁴

As odd as Ruth Graham’s humorous quip may sound, her answer is solidly covenantal. In the midst of extreme marital discord, Christian couples remedy problems with counseling, temporary separation, or other measures, but not with divorce. You may one day think divorce the best, even the only, remedy for your marriage, but you should evict such thoughts.

4. If the strength of your marriage depends on mood—how you feel at the moment—then you are living contractually, not covenantally.
5. If your spouse does not know that every dispute or disagreement will not end in one of you leaving the other, then your marriage cannot grow. If your spouse believes your marriage is, literally, one heated disagreement from extinction, the marriage is doomed to wither until you assure them such is not the case. In such cases, disagreements should be prefaced with an assurance that both spouses love each other and are committed to working through the disagreement, no matter how long it takes.

In short, if your marriage is weak when things don’t go well, but strong when they do, then you have based your marriage relationship on a contract. This is very unstable. But if you do not feel threatened by divorce when things aren’t going well, and you are confident that the two of you are committed to your marriage no matter what happens, then your marriage is based upon a covenant commitment. This is desirable.

The cure for the damage

²⁴ *Time U.S.*, “Ruth Graham, Soulmate to Billy, Dies.” By Nancy Gibbs and Michael Duffy, June 14, 2007.

One is always tempted to cure marriage problems with bare commands. Such commands cannot, in the final analysis, mend hearts broken by or scared of abandonment. There is one cure only: God's covenant love for Christians.

Hesed is a Hebrew word used ~250 times in the Old Testament. The word itself is notoriously difficult to translate because of its richness, but some possible translations are "Loyalty, faithfulness, goodness."²⁵ *Hesed* is a steadfast love which outlasts obedience and creation itself:

Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and *steadfast love* with those who love him and keep his commandments...

Deuteronomy 7:9

"The mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but *my steadfast love* shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed," says the LORD who has compassion on you.

Isaiah 54:10

Hesed can describe relationships of man to man, man to God, and God to man, and when referring to God's love for man, it means "God's Never Stopping, Never Giving Up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love."²⁶ In other words, God's *hesed*, His covenant love, is His settled disposition to love believers no matter the obstacles. It is a love which does not first calculate the cost of relationship, or even the possibility of overcoming the obstacles to relationship, but a love which loves, and upon loving the beloved, bears every cost and overcomes every obstacle. God's covenant love, then, is a committed love, a love which perseveres no matter the pain, and triumphs through tempest. The Apostle Paul describes this love in 1 Corinthians 13,

Love is patient and kind...
 Love bears all things...
 Love endures all things...
 Love never ends.

Astonishing, isn't it. No words about feeling good or happiness or conditions. Love cares not how it feels, nor about its happiness, nor about conditions. Love is lovely, and indestructible, precisely *because* it transcends feelings, happiness, and conditions. And once such love comes into our hearts, it changes all our relationships, and especially marriage. As the theme song from Married With Children swaggers, "Love and marriage, love and marriage, go together like a horse and carriage", an undeniable truth pervades: love and marriage do go together. And though Al and Peg left much to be desired, their marriage held forth a powerful truth, the truth

²⁵ *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol. 2; p. 211. Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren.

²⁶ Sally Lloyd-Jones, *The Jesus Storybook Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007.

that no matter Al's laziness and Peg's annoyances, they remained committed to one another.

But in order for this love to become a delightful reality in your marriage, you must taste it yourself. Not until you have drunk deeply of God's covenant-love for you, a love which persisted in the midst of pain, and overcame all obstacles, will you be able to love your spouse this way.

God's love for you, dear Christian, is patient. God waited at least 4000 years to satisfy His infinite wrath against sin. He could have consigned all mankind to hell the moment Adam and Eve sinned, but He did not. Instead, He waited, and waited, and waited some more, enduring animal sacrifices which could not atone for sin (Hebrews 10:4) and rebellious people who could not, and would not, keep from sin. When sinned against, we demand justice, and quickly; when our infinitely holy God was sinned against, He demanded justice, but patiently. And not until the Lamb of God was laid on Calvary's altar did He exhaust his wrath against our sins. He waited not hours, or days, or years, or decades, but centuries, until the moment He who knew no sin became sin (2 Corinthians 5:21). Then the patience of God waited no more. The gavel slammed; the wrath unleashed; the justice tolled. The hell Christ suffered on the Cross proves God's patience. God passed over former sins, not because He forgot them, but because, in His patience, He waited for the day when He would bear the punishment Himself, in His Son, so we could live. God's love for you is infinitely patient, dear Christian. Have you tasted it?

God's love for you, dear Christian, bears all things, endures all things, and never ends. It stands up against rejection; it does not collapse under the load of our sin; it does not turn-coat at the first sign of difficulty; it transcends feelings; it does not give up. You should probably praise God for this. I doubt Jesus looked down from the Cross at the people crucifying Him and thought, "Wow, you people are easy to love. The abandonment I feel because you fled Me; the false charges you brought against Me; the skin you tore off my back through floggings; the spikes you drove through my wrists and ankles; the nasty words you're hurling My way; and your sins for which I am suffering the hell of My Father's wrath—all these give Me an indescribably warm and fuzzy sensation for you. Right now, I have this tremendously loving feeling for all of you." I doubt that very much. Jesus Christ died because He was committed to us, because of His covenant love for us, because of His Never Stopping, Never Giving Up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love! My brothers and sisters, do you know what drove Jesus Christ through the tumultuous wilderness temptations, and through the staggering Garden of Gethsemane, and through the God-forsaken Cross? Do you know what drove Him? It was not a *feeling* of love or a slushy, schmaltzy sentimentalism. It was a promise; a covenant; a commitment He made to you and I. He endured because He *said* He would; he died in our place because He *promised* He would; He drank the cup of wrath with our name on it because He *guaranteed* He would. Nothing else

spurned Jesus Christ on except the promise that He would love us unto death. How do we know nothing else spurned Him on? Because on the Cross, *there was nothing else left*. His own people had rejected Him (John 1:11); His family stood aloof and confused; His most trusted disciples had fled; and, infinitely worse, His own Father forsook Him: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?” On the Cross Jesus Christ hung alone, utterly alone—eternally damned; entirely forsaken; completely crushed. And as you gaze upon this scene, a scene which reveals your only hope of salvation is Jesus’ *commitment* to you, you must draw the connection between his permanent public promise to you and yours to your spouse. If you have not made that connection, you must study Jesus’ love for you until you do. Your marriage will die without it. Jesus Christ, dear Christian, is not asking you to do in your marriage anything which He has not already done for your salvation! He made a permanent public promise to you, to *you* believer, and He stopped at nothing to fulfill it. That is marital love; that is commitment; that is a permanent public promise you can count on. You can, and should, lean wholly upon Jesus, not because you are loveable, but because He has promised, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5).

If Jesus’ relationship with us is covenantal, and it is, and marriage is a covenant, and it is, then Christian husbands and wives must love each other with the same love with which they have been loved—the committed, covenantal, unstoppable love of a dying Savior. Do you love your spouse this way? Do you love him or her no matter what it costs you? Do you love your husband unconditionally? Are you willing to overcome any obstacle in order to keep your wife?

Where do we go from here?

Aware of the substantial nature of this chapter, we now address five common objections to marital commitment followed by six questions about marital commitment.

Objection #1

“A piece of paper is so cold and distant. I don’t need from my spouse, and neither should they need from me, a piece of paper to announce our marriage. They have my word; my word is enough.”

One of the most powerful aspects of God’s promises to us is He wrote them down in the Bible. The Bible is the written record of God’s promised love to us, a love that says, “I will love you unconditionally; I will bear the cost of your sins. And I am so confident My love for you will never die that I will write it down. I want you to have a written copy of what I have promised you. You can appeal to it, and pray about it, anytime you like. Go ahead...see for yourself...hold Me accountable.”

But you don't need the Bible to prove the importance of formal commitment. Consider a statistic, followed by a testimony, both of which, without endorsing cohabitation, illustrate the power of an official commitment:

Marriages preceded by cohabitation are as much as 50% more likely to end in divorce... *There is no higher divorce risk, however, if you live with someone to whom you already are engaged, which means "a ring and a wedding date," or if cohabitation is limited to one's future spouse.*²⁷

"We're getting married this summer and we're both looking forward to it. We've lived together for one year because we could not afford the wedding and we felt that paying for one apartment as opposed to two would help us financially for when we got married. I would not however have lived with him had we not been engaged. That's a good way to get burned."²⁸

Don't be easily deceived by someone who says, "We don't need a piece of paper or a public record which says we are married." It sounds good, but what they are really saying is, "I love you, but not *that* much." If someone is not willing to go on record as belonging exclusively and permanently to you, then they have not committed themselves to you—they have one foot in and the other out. Genuine love desires a record of promises made, and will register them publicly, in some form or fashion, and happily so.

Objection #2

"Our marriage has existed for 20 years on the basis of our feelings. How can you say that the feeling of "being in love" cannot sustain a marriage?"

Your marriage has not existed for 20 years on the basis of your feelings. If there has ever been a tear, a pain, or even the hint of a bad feeling at anytime in your 20 years of marriage, then the feeling of being in love has not sustained your marriage. Why not? Because at those low times, you stayed regardless of how you felt. You felt betrayed or slighted or forgotten or hurt, yet you stayed. For a moment, the feeling of "being in love" was gone. Therefore it is not the reason you stayed. At that moment, something other than your feelings kept you in the marriage. Maybe tradition kept you, and you said to yourself, "I cannot leave my spouse, for that is not the way I was raised." Maybe money kept you, "I cannot leave my spouse for divorce is expensive." And it is. Maybe security kept you, "I cannot leave my spouse for I have no place to go and no job." Or maybe the fear of the unknown

²⁷ David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe, *Ten Things Teens Should Know About Marriage: Research Resources*, p. 3 (2003):

http://www.virginia.edu/marriageproject/pdfs/print_dibbleinstitute.pdf (italics mine).

²⁸ Anne-Marie Ambert, *Cohabitation and Marriage: How are they related*, p. 13 (2005). The Vanier Institute of the Family: www.vifamily.ca/sites/default/files/cohabitation_and_marriage.pdf.

kept you: "I cannot leave my spouse because I fear loneliness, I fear having to date again, I fear having to start all over with someone again." But at the moment your feelings were hurt, something other than your feelings kept you in the marriage.

Objection #3

"When I first married, I was committed to my spouse. Since then, my commitment to them has waned, and I am more in love with someone else. I believe God wants me happy, so I plan to divorce and marry the one with whom I now feel in love."

For starters, marriage is not a relationship to make us happy, but to make us holy. See the chapter on the purpose of marriage for a treatment of such misunderstanding. It should also be borne in mind that a second marriage will not supernaturally resolve your problems. Since *you* are part of your marriage problem, and possibly even the primary part, changing partners will not solve the problem but merely relocate the problem. Additionally, be encouraged to know a sour marriage is not necessarily beyond repair. Spouses who have burned bridges, creating seemingly irreparable memories, do not have to divorce. By God's grace, and almost always through a season of heartfelt and painful repentance and tears, forgiveness can heal. Some spouses, at periodic junctures of marriage, undergo seasons of such powerful repentance they feel like newlyweds, as though they were married to a new spouse, and had themselves become new creatures. There is hope for a marriage filled with strife, horrendous memories, and abuse. But, as with all redemption, the bright hope demands you first walk through the valley of the shadow of repentance. Your marriage must get worse, or at least it must feel worse, through repentance (repentance is very painful!), before it can heal. And if you walk through it, each spouse committed to forgiveness, your marriage will emerge stronger and more delightful than any other marriage you entertained the thought of entering could be. Said another way, tumultuous marriages are not necessarily failed marriages, provided the spouses are sorry for sins and forgiving one another; the only marriages which genuinely fail are those which end in divorce:

Christ will never leave his wife. Ever. There may be times of painful distance and tragic backsliding on our part. But Christ keeps his covenant forever. Marriage is a display of that! That is the ultimate thing we can say about it. It puts the glory of Christ's covenant-keeping love on display...

So I argue that staying married is not mainly about staying in love. It's about covenant-keeping. If a spouse falls in love with another person, one profoundly legitimate response from the grieved spouse and from the

church is, “So what! Your being ‘in love’ with someone else is not decisive. Keeping your covenant is decisive.”²⁹

Objection #4

“Commitment ruins intimacy. How can I be truly intimate and enjoy the ‘feeling of being in love’ when deep down I know our intimacy is based on a life-long commitment rather than passionate desires?”

Commitment is the only way true intimacy grows. For example, how much would you invest yourself in a business partner on the verge of relocating to another state and abandoning his stake in your partnership? Or how much time, money, and training will you invest in an employee who tells you they will remain in your company so long as no better employment option presents itself to them? Not much, I suspect. Yet we have this silly notion that we will somehow pour our inmost being, our very heart and soul, into someone who enters marriage with one foot in and one foot out. Such a notion is silly indeed, and very foolish; impossible, really. If you are not sure of your spouse’s commitment to you, and they’re not sure or yours to them, then your marriage is dying, or at least not growing. And if you’re convinced of your ability to pour your heart and soul into someone who may next year be in the arms of another, please stop kidding yourself. If you are not absolutely sure your spouse is committed to you, to the exclusion of all others, then, whether you recognize it or not, you are withholding part of yourself back from them, and rightly so. The only spouses who hold nothing back are those spouses who hear the other say, “I love you, only you, and will until one of us dies. I am going nowhere; you have my word. I am committed to you, to the exclusion of all others.” That is someone you will give your heart to, and with whom intimacy will burgeon.

Genuine love and intimacy thrive on commitment. Try it. The next time you encounter your spouse, tell him or her, “I want you to know I am deeply committed to you. I promise I will go nowhere else; I promise I will love no one else. You are the one I will spend the rest of my life with; I want both you and the entire world to know of my committed love for you. I am yours, till death do we part.” I doubt your spouse responds, “That is so cold.” Quite the opposite will probably result. Genuine love and intimacy thrive on commitment:

The idea that ‘being in love’ is the only reason for remaining married really leaves no room for marriage as a contract or promise at all. If love is the whole thing, then the promise can add nothing; and if it adds nothing, then it should not be made. The curious thing is that lovers themselves, while they remain really in love, know this better than those who talk about love. As [G.K.] Chesterton pointed out, those who are in love have a natural

²⁹ John Piper, *This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Permanence*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009; pp. 25,31.

inclination to bind themselves by promises. Love songs all over the world are full of vows of eternal constancy. The Christian law is not forcing upon the passion of love something which is foreign to that passions' own nature: it is demanding that lovers should take seriously something which their passion of itself impels them to do.³⁰

Objection #5

“My partner and I want to make sure we are compatible before we make a lifelong commitment to one another. Marriage is no different than buying a car, and who would buy a car without first test driving it?”

Let's use the test driving analogy. When you test drive a car you have an appropriate relationship with the vehicle, not too distant, but not too close. You get an appropriate feel for the vehicle without destroying the vehicle, and if you choose not to buy it, your test drive did not steal anything away from the car which the eventual owner will miss. This is roughly equivalent to dating.

Now imagine a prospective buyer entering a car dealership with a full chest of tools, walking over to the car he would like to purchase, and meticulously dismantling the entire car—engine, transmission, interior and all. How many car dealers would stand back and say, “Take your time. Make sure you check it all over.” None. They would remove you from their showroom the moment you walked in. Why? Because you are stealing value from a car you don't own, value which a prospective owner will miss. When partners cohabit, participating in virtually all the intimate benefits of marriage without a commitment, they're not simply “test driving” the car. They're dismantling the car in the dealer's showroom. There is nothing wrong with dismantling the car, provided the car is in your name and sitting in your garage. But there is something drastically wrong with dismantling a car not belonging to you. Until you make a promise of payment, a promise of self-sacrifice, you have no right to treat that car how you please. So too in dating relationships.

The problem with cohabitation is that it breeds a form of skepticism into the relationship which can seldom be cured. Cohabitation is like saying about a car you desire to purchase, “I like this car, but not enough to pay full price for it. I'll buy it for half of what it's worth.” If the car could hear, it would be saddened and demeaned. Likewise, one or both of the cohabiters will be saddened or demeaned because what cohabiters say to each other is, “I like you, but not enough to commit myself fully; I'll live with you on the condition I don't have to commit fully.” This is a horrible start to marriage.

Question #1

³⁰ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. NY: HarperCollins, 2001; p. 107.

“My spouse and I did not enter marriage on the foundation of a permanent public promise. We entered marriage on the wrong foundation. What should we do now?”

First, don't fret. Nearly every husband and wife, if honest, enters marriage with at least one foot on the wrong foundation. Second, shift to the foundation of a permanent public promise (a covenant), and discuss how this changes your view of one another. Third, continually re-examine the foundation of your marriage, because even solid marriages shift foundations over a period of time. As you and your spouse examine the foundation of your marriage, you will find the foundation shifts by the day, the hour, and even the minute. Satan is that subtle. One minute you serve your spouse joyfully, though they've treated you poorly that day. At that moment you are standing on the solid foundation of covenant marriage—you love your spouse at their worst. But five minutes later your demeanor changes, your service stops, and you tell your spouse in no uncertain terms that if they don't become perfect fairly soon, you will treat them like they are treating you. Now you are standing on the sandy foundation of contract marriage—you love your spouse only at their best.

Question #2

“My boyfriend and I have been dating for one year. We both “feel” like we're in love, but are frightened by the prospect that one day those feelings will wane and we will be tempted to walk away from each other. Therefore, we are reticent to commit ourselves to each other. Do you have any advice?”

First, you need not be afraid of your feelings for one another. The feelings of being in love *should* accompany a couple to their wedding; but only the promise of unconditional love will sustain the marriage thereafter.³¹ So whatever you do, don't abandon the feelings of joy and excitement you have for your prospective spouse—these are good feelings to have.

Second, you need not be frightened that your current feelings will wane, leaving you tempted to walk away from each other. Your current feelings *will* wane, and you *will be* tempted to walk away from each other. That should remove the fright. Remember, marriage vows are the promise that, *regardless* of how you feel, and *regardless* of the temptations to walk away, you will not part from each other until death.

Question #3

³¹ C.S. Lewis says something similar when he writes,

“Being in love” first moved [a married couple] to promise fidelity: this quieter love enables them to keep the promise. It is on this love that the engine of marriage is run: being in love was the explosion that started it (*Mere Christianity*, HarperCollins, 2001; p. 109).

“I agree with the whole “commitment” thing, but am wondering how marriage can be enjoyed if my spouse and I are married only because we promised we would stay married? If my spouse is married to me only because he promised he would never leave, that does not seem like an enjoyable relationship to be in. How can it be enjoyable?”

You might have too high an opinion of yourself. If you would rather be loved because you are loveable, not because your spouse is committed, then you assume you are loveable all the time. Ask your spouse if you are. If they are honest, they will say, “No!”, and their answer will help you appreciate being loved by someone committed to you. This is enjoyable. Also, I have never heard a Christian say, “You know, God’s *promised* love really hampers my intimacy with Him. I wish He loved me not according to a promise, but according to His loving feelings toward me. My relationship with God is so dull because sometimes I get the impression He loves me only because He promised He would. What a drag.” If Christians are allowed to believe this, then I, for one, am not a Christian, and want never to be one.

Question #4

“If I whole-heartedly commit myself to someone, I am setting myself up for a huge heartache. Is there a way to enter marriage without the possibility of heartache, without becoming vulnerable to another?”

The short answer to the question is, “No.” It is not possible. On a serious note, you should choose a spouse carefully for this very reason. Marriage makes you extremely vulnerable, so if, while dating, your boyfriend becomes violent or threatens violence, you should flee him. Men are at their absolute best when dating, so marrying an abusive boyfriend will likely heighten, not solve, the abuse. Anger, though directed *away* from you while dating, will, sooner or later, be aimed *at* you in marriage.

On a lighter note, if your number one concern about marriage is avoiding vulnerability (and understandably so if previous relationships left you abused and damaged) then marriage will be a scary place for you. But the alternative may be worse:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.³²

Let’s uncover your fears with honesty: Love hurts, and so will marriage. Jesus’ love for you cost Him His life, and the wrath of God hurt when it

³² C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*. NY: Harcourt, 1988; p. 121.

slammed against Him. The scream of the damned was a cry of pain and hurt, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus' love for you took Him not on a pleasure cruise, but a suffering safari. To an infinitely smaller degree, so will your marriage. But you don't need the Bible for this information, consider lyrics from the song *Love Hurts* written by The Everly Brothers in 1960 and popularized by Nazareth in the mid-1970's:

Love hurts, love scars, love wounds and marks
 Any heart not tough or strong enough
 To take a lot of pain, take a lot of pain.
 Love is like a cloud holds a lot of rain.
 Love hurts. Oooh, love hurts.

I'm young I know, but even so
 I know a thing or two. I've learned from you.
 I've really learned a lot, really learned a lot.
 Love is like a flame, it burns you when it's hot.
 Love hurts. Oooh, love hurts.

If you don't want to be hurt in a redemptive way, then don't marry. If you cannot handle being opposed, and painfully so, by a member of the opposite sex, and you cannot handle being confronted with your sins, then you should spare yourself the pain of marriage. Your spouse *will* see your sin, and, if they care about you, they *will* call you to repent of it, and your pride will ache. But you must consider the equation's other side. Not only will you be hurt by the sins of your spouse, but your sins will hurt them. Your spouse will bring pain into your life, and you will inflict pain on them; they will disappoint you, and you will disappoint them. So if you cannot handle heartache, and cannot stomach being someone else's heartache for their good, then marriage is not for you.

For those desirous of marriage, yet fearful of being hurt, there is something you might consider. One way to tell you are ready to be married, and married to *that* particular person, is when your *love* for that person overcomes your *fears*. Think of a teeter-totter. Initially, your skepticism and fear of marrying them weighs heavy, leaving love and commitment hanging in thin air; but there comes a time, usually, in dating/courting relationships which result in marriage, when your desire to marry the person overcomes your fears. It is not so much that your fears are removed, but your desire to commit yourself to the person surpasses your fears. The teeter-totter tips. When you come to the settled conviction that this person is not merely someone you can live with, but someone you can't live without, you may be well on your way to marriage. Another way of putting it is this: when you come to the settled conviction that you would regret for the rest of your life not telling the other person that you desire to spend the rest of your life with them, then you may be getting close to marriage. Your desire to commit to them has exceeded your fears.

If you are not there yet, and have not been able to arrive there though you wish you could, you may need more time. You may need to work

through some past relationships where you were hurt, and forgive those who hurt you. Until you forgive those who betrayed your trust (parents, siblings, relatives, friends, former boyfriends/girlfriends), you will not genuinely trust a spouse, and will not be comfortable marrying them until you are confident of their perfection.

Question #5

“I continually serve my spouse, day in and day out, yet they never return the favor. I am worn out by it. I have been serving them for years now, yet they never serve me. What can I do?”

Two things come to mind. First, Jesus Christ loved you to His death. He stopped at nothing to save you. Your redemption so wore out Jesus He slept soundly in a small boat in the middle of a huge storm; your redemption so wore Him out He could not carry His cross up the hill to Golgotha for he had not slept for at least 1.5 days; and your redemption thrust Jesus onto the shore of God’s unrelenting tidal waves of wrath—His body broke, He was crushed for your iniquities. This good news is the only hope you have for serving an unresponsive spouse. Jesus expended Himself for you unto death; yet your response to His having served you is meager at best, and more likely non-existent in comparison. You must draw strength from Christ alone, or you will weaken. If you look for reasons to serve your spouse in your spouse, your service will die out quickly. If, however, you look to Jesus Christ who died for you, you will be able to serve your spouse regardless of their response.

Second, it may be that you have never served your spouse covenantally. If you clean up the house, make his favorite meal, wash his laundry, run his errands, and avail him of your physical intimacy, all in the hopes that he will return the favor, then you have been loving him contractually, not covenantally. You should love your husband, and husbands you should love your wives, because Christ has loved you—because you have been loved by the Lover. Any other motivation for sacrificially serving your spouse will leave you angry, frustrated, embittered, self-righteous, and defeated. Remember, a contract marriage says, “I will please you so long as you please me. I will scratch your back if you scratch mine, but if you don’t scratch my back, I will not scratch yours.” A covenant relationship says, “I will meet your needs regardless of whether or not you meet my needs. I will scratch your back even if you don’t scratch mine.” A covenant marriage is one in which your spouse is more important than your individual needs.

Some will say, “Hey, that does not sound very fulfilling.” Really? May I suggest to you that there is nothing more fulfilling than this. There is nothing more fulfilling than being in a relationship in which you are not seeking to fulfill yourself. There is nothing more fulfilling than being in a relationship where the other person endlessly and tirelessly seeks your fulfillment. The other person is wired, geared, set on fulfilling you. There is

nothing more fulfilling than being fulfilled not by yourself, but by someone else. Imagine it. You can check “fulfillment” off your daily “To do” list. You can mark it off, for your fulfillment is on your spouse’s list.

Question #6

“I am doing everything I can to assure my spouse I will never leave them. Yet even the smallest of my mistakes and most unintentional of my sins leave him/her with the impression that I am walking out the door soon. He/she takes everything as a personal assault. Even though my commitment to them grows stronger by the day, they seem to think my commitment is waning. What can I do?”

Many spouses who think every disagreement and sin is a sign of divorce suffer from prior abandonments. If your spouse comes from a divorced home where one of his parents walked out permanently after a disagreement, then every disagreement will make him fearful of divorce. Or if your spouse saw his father or mother commit a grievous sin which prompted a divorce, then each of your sins, and theirs, will invariably frighten them with the possibility of divorce. Spouses who, in childhood, watched two parents work through every single disagreement, no matter how long or heated, will generally have less a problem with commitment, and will not read divorce into disagreements or sins. But spouses who watched two parents part ways after numerous heated exchanges, or after grievous sins, will feel like every disagreement or sin in marriage must lead to divorce. This is usually no small matter. If you, your spouse, or both come from a divorced home, you will have to take extra precautions when disagreeing, and will have to handle each other’s sins in an exceptionally gracious way.

Here are some suggestions to avoid giving your spouse the impression that disagreements and sins mean divorce is near:

1. When you disagree, pause for a moment at the beginning of the disagreement and remind each other that you will work through the disagreement no matter how long it takes. Pray with each other.
2. If your spouse comes from a divorced home, or from a home where abandonment of some sort ravaged their youth, then when you deal with their sin you must reassure them their sin is not, and is not going to be used as, ground for divorce. If you do not establish this each time you deal with their sin, then, because of past experiences, the exposure of their sins may feel to them like you are building a case for divorce. Be sensitive. Their parent’s marriage ended on account of sin, so naturally, they conclude, sin leads to divorce. Assure them, in handling even the most mundane sins, that you love them in the midst of their sins, and are committed to them for life. If you adopt this approach, over time, they might learn to appreciate being confronted with their sins.

The Self-Sacrifice of Marriage

A Humbling Relationship

Marital bliss comes not from being served, but from serving. Conversely, as moths destroy clothing, so selfishness devastates marriage:

Nowhere has selfishness done more damage than in homes. God's fundamental building-block for society is now displaced by self-assertion. Wives are too self-important to minister to their husbands. Their own names and careers are too significant for life to be wasted in helping husbands and living "for them." Husbands are too self-absorbed to share all of life with their wives, too self-centred to be thoughtful of and loving towards their spouses. Wisely the Scripture returns to the centre point. "Wives, submit." "Husbands, love."

Nothing is more distressing to pastors counseling a troubled man and wife than to hear from both competing claims of self-interest. Yet nothing is so common in marriage difficulties as to hear self-assertive remarks and to see self-devotion at grave cost to a spouse. How soon marriage counseling sessions would end if husbands and wives were competing in thoughtful self-denial. If the woman were anxious to yield to her God-given head in the home, and the man were ambitious to serve her comfort and welfare as being his own flesh, there would be no room for contention and strife. "Wives, submit" and "husbands, love" must be repeated until the message reaches beyond ears to the hearts of spouses.³³

You must know that marriage is not an institution to make you feel good about yourself, but to humble you, in the presence of your spouse, before the God who designed marriage, and if you do not embrace this fact, you will crush it, and will be crushed, like a flimsy folding chair collapsed beneath you. To begin, then, spouses should know at least five things:

1. Marriage exposes self-centeredness
2. Marriage builds character
3. Marriage requires forgiveness
4. Marriage is *voluntary* self-sacrifice
5. Marriage cannot be understood apart from the gospel

Marriage exposes self-centeredness³⁴

When growing up, your parents probably told you, in some fashion, how self-centered and sinful you were, but, adept at selective hearing, you ignored them and moved out at 18 years of age. Your first college roommate reiterated what your parents said—"You are a sinful mess in need of

³³ Walter Chantry, *The Shadow of the Cross*. Banner of Truth, 2009; pp. 54-55.

³⁴ I am indebted to one of Tim Keller's sermons for this point.

change”—so you moved in with another at semester break. Years later your co-workers and employer offered suggestions for your maturity, but you evaded them with a change of job every so often. And then, with seeming conspiracy, your fellow church members encouraged you to grow up, but you passed them off as “extra-super-holy people”—nut-case religious fanatics with an overly idealistic doctrine of sanctification. And now, to your amazement, almost as if he or she consulted your parents, former roommates, co-workers, and fellow Christians, your spouse agrees. You *are* self-centered. Mom and dad weren’t so far off after all; it just took a permanent public relationship (marriage) to convince you they were right. But it gets worse. The longer you are married, the more accurate and painful (the truth always hurts) our spouse’s edifying encouragements. And one day it all makes sense. *Marriage is not a human invention to make you happy; it is God’s invention to make you holy.* God takes your selfishness in marriage and uses it against you for your own good. The reason you finally have to grow is because your self-centeredness is ruining your life, and you can’t run away (remember: *permanent* public promise)! Marriage forces you to realize your biggest problem in life has never been other people; your biggest problem has always been *yourself*. In marriage, all of our self-centerednesses disturb us, and for the first time in our lives, we realize it is *ourselves* we have been unable to live with. *We* are our misery. Then, with a smile on our face, we chuckle to heaven, “You did this on purpose, didn’t You—having me marry this particular person to expose my self-centeredness?” Said reverently, God chuckles back, “Yes I did. Gotcha.”

One of the best wedding gifts God gave you was a full-length mirror called your spouse. Had there been a card attached, it would have said, “Here’s to helping you discover what you’re *really* like!”³⁵

A life-long marriage confines you to one of two options: Either you can remain as sinful as the day you wed and grow increasingly miserable, making the Grumpy Old Men look like jolly-good fellows; or, you can hop on board with God’s sanctification process and grow increasingly holy, along with your spouse. The choice is yours, but, by God’s grace, after enough time sulking in sin and misery, the choice to live in sin becomes no choice at all, and holiness becomes the preferred choice, though painfully so. Most Christian marriages proceed with alternating seasons of sin-sulk and grace-growth, though some marriages stubbornly persist in recurrent sin, and remain, therefore, recurrently hellish.

Christian marriage leaves you with no choice, really, about growing up in Christ. If you thought you were a fairly selfless person prior to marriage, you soon discover otherwise. Self-centeredness afflicts the most sanctified singles in ways they never perceived, and could not so long as they remained

³⁵ Gary and Betsy Ricucci, *Love that Lasts: When Marriage Meets Grace*.

solo. Therefore, the holiest single will encounter aspects of their lives which need reforming, and quickly so, for sanity's sake.

Marriage builds character

Martin Luther, the great 16th century reformer, lived about a decade under the rigorous, ascetic lifestyle of a monk. Fastings, long and regular prayers, rigorous self-examinations and confessions of sin, and denial of physical comforts were designed to grow the character of each monk in conformity to Christ. Yet after living the monastic life, Luther touted marriage, not monasticism, as the school of character—the place in which God most sharpens us. When one of his children cried for an hour, bringing he and his wife Katie to the end of their ropes, he commented, “This is the sort of thing that has caused the Church fathers to vilify marriage.” And with customary hilarity, Luther exclaimed about the vexations of marriage:

Good God...what a lot of trouble there is in marriage! Adam has made a mess of our nature. Think of all the squabbles Adam and Eve must have had in the course of their nine hundred years. Eve would say, “You ate the apple,” and Adam would retort, “You gave it to me.”³⁶

Marriage forces you to grow where you have grown least. Knowing this, and knowing that through marriage and family God was growing him in patience, Luther said, “All my life is patience. I have to have patience with the pope, the heretics, my family, and Katie.” But, as his biographer notes, Luther recognized it was good for him to grow in patience.³⁷

In case Luther's experience does not convince you marriage brings trouble, listen to the Apostle Paul:

Those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that...The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband.

1 Corinthians 7:28,32-34

While the married man studies his wife, converses with her, works to provide for her, does the dishes, changes diapers, handles emotional crises, runs to the store for flowers at 10pm on their anniversary (again), and asks continual forgiveness for the wretch he is, the single man spends time studying Jesus Christ, conversing with him, evangelizing the lost, and sacrificing his life for the advancement of His great name. Something every

³⁶ Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*. NY: Meridian, 1977; p. 235.

³⁷ Ibid.

man and woman should ponder before marriage is, “Am I ready for the trouble a marriage between two sinful people will bring?” And if, while smiling at your fiancé, you actually think your marriage will create no difficulties, I pity you. Please read the next section; more than that, please talk to people who remember the first five years of marriage.

Marriage requires forgiveness

Whenever a spouse feels the urge to nit-pick the failures of the other, that spouse should open the Bible to 1 Timothy 1:15, walk to a mirror, and recite with Paul, “I am the chief of sinners.” Paul wasn’t kidding; probably we shouldn’t either. Unless a husband and wife learn patience with each other’s sins (yes, I meant to use the word “sin”), the marriage will be a miserable relationship. There is always something to pick apart—always!—so if you desire a marriage consisting of two people degrading each other endlessly, go ahead. You may. Plenty of couples do it, and you can too, if you like. But why would you? Has God forgiven you for sins you didn’t repent of? Yes; you committed at least 1000 sins yesterday, but probably only repented to God of 50, or maybe none at all. Then forgive as you have been forgiven. Doesn’t Jesus bear patiently—infinately patiently—with you? Yes. Then extend that patience to your spouse. Couldn’t God nit-pick you apart? Of course He could, so what are you trying to prove?

Jesus already sorted through our spouse’s sins, and in amazing grace, heaped them not upon our spouse’s head, but upon His own head, taking the blow of God’s wrath due them. He who never sinned took upon Himself all our sin, so that we might be declared righteous. Spouses who nit-pick should learn this gospel, for when it soaks into their souls, it removes nit-picking. And for those who persist in nit-picking, consider this: “*You*, not your spouse, are your own biggest problem.”

Forgiveness is essential to marriage; without it, your marriage *will* die: Live together in the forgiveness of your sins, for without it no human fellowship, least of all a marriage, can survive. Don’t insist on your rights, don’t blame each other, don’t judge or condemn each other, don’t find fault with each other, but accept each other as you are, and forgive each other every day from the bottom of your hearts.³⁸

One help for forgiveness is determining whether a spouse’s sin merits address, or whether the sin is really not that big of a deal and can be overlooked. I have encountered many sins, both in other marriages and my own, deemed massive by the offended, but which, in the final analysis, were petty. The reason they were blown out of proportion is the inconvenience caused the other spouse. Thus, for the main, a spouse’s complaints about

³⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison: The Enlarged Edition*. NY: Touchstone, 1997; p. 46.

sins of the other, sins which they are unwilling to forgive, says, oftentimes, much less about the heinousness of the sins and much more about the unforgiving spirit of the complainer. Forgiveness is costly and painful. When you forgive your spouse an offense, you incur a cost they should have paid. Don't think for a moment it will come easy. Forgiveness hurts; forgiveness is painful; forgiveness costs emotional energy. But before you throw in the towel, look at Calvary, for there, on the Cross, Jesus incurred the debt you owe. Don't think for a moment it came easy for Him. It cost Him His life. Ponder this, for it is the only means by which you will be able to forgive your spouse, sin after sin, year after inconvenient year, decade after burdensome decade, from your heart (Matthew 18:35). If one spouse complains endlessly about sins of the other, the complaining spouse might be the bigger sinner needing to repent of self-righteousness, or at least needing to admit their unwillingness to bear the cost of forgiveness.

For those of you confident neither you nor your spouse will commit painful sins necessitating costly forgiveness, hear this: you are pathetically naïve. If I were standing in front of you, I'd be strongly tempted to shake you, and would say, "Were you born yesterday?! Grow up! You're two sinners joining in the closest of all relationships! What do you think is going to happen? SIN! Sick, painful, warped, offensive, regrettable SIN! And what do you think it's going to take to work through that sin? Repentance and forgiveness! Costly, expensive, agonizing, devastating, pride-damaging, excruciatingly painful, tear-jerking, voice-quivering repentance and forgiveness!" Oh, for those of you entering marriage with rose colored glasses, I urge you to wake up, cast off the blinders, and smell the nasty coffee from the pot of daily life you're about to drink. God uses marriage to refine you, not dine you, and refining, if you don't already know, entails burning, so unless you are well acquainted with how to repent of your sin to another, and forgive another for sinning grossly against you, marriage will burn you to the ground until you become well acquainted.

If, while reading this, your marriage is on the brink, and, because of pathological lying, sexual sins, child abuse, or outright yelling, screaming and hitting, you're ready to throw in the towel, I urge you, before serving divorce papers, to consider what John Piper calls a "redemptive separation",³⁹ a period of time where you live away from your spouse, preferably under a different roof, so that (1) your lives are not in danger, and (2) each of you can think more clearly, seeking counsel without threats and grace to forgive without coercion. For the spouse sinned against, separation provides temporary relief from gross sin, allowing them to re-evaluate the relationship, and, by God's grace, use every means available to pursue repentance and forgiveness. And for the spouse in gross sin, separation

³⁹ John Piper, *This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Permanence*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009; p. 53.

allows them a foretaste of a stark reality coming to a theatre near them if they don't repent: their gross, persistent, unrepentant sin is going to end the marriage.

Marriage is *voluntary* self-sacrifice

If either the husband or the wife has to be compelled to fulfill his or her marital duties, the marriage will be hard for the simple reason that you cannot compel your spouse to perform his or her duties. This is where many couples derail, so let me say it again. Marital self-sacrifice is a *voluntary* attitude borne out of a heart melted by the gospel. Husbands, no matter how much you push, persuade, yell at, or manipulate your wife, you cannot compel her to submit to you from the heart. Likewise, wives, no matter how much you manipulate, control, yell at, or withhold yourself sexually, you cannot compel your husband to love you from the heart. In other words, husbands, if your wives submit to you in order to avoid a sermon on submissiveness, you need to back down, and wives, if your husbands love you in order to avoid your wrath, then you must back down. Submission and love cannot be compelled with harsh sermons or wrath. Only the gospel creates voluntary submission and love, therefore, make much of it in your marriage!

Marriage cannot be understood apart from the gospel

Husbands, Paul never deals with love for your wife apart from Christ's love for the church. Why do you think that is? I'll tell you why: because marriage is powerless and lost if you disconnect it from Christ's love. You will never be able to love your wife properly by reading a bunch of books on proper etiquette. You may have a temporary moral transformation, but you will never have a heart-change deep inside. Plenty of marriages have suffered from husbands who read book after book on marriage, but no marriage has suffered from husband's who meditate, think, dwell upon, and drink deeply of Christ's dying love for His bride. Likewise, plenty of marriages have suffered from wives who read one romantic book after another, but no marriage has suffered from a wife who meditates, thinks, dwells upon, and drinks deeply of Christ's sacrificial love for her, and especially His submission to the Father's will in the Garden of Gethsemane.

The Self-Sacrifice of Marriage

A Husband's Love

Customary courtesy says, “Ladies first”, unless, of course, being first means taking the first “blow.” So, lest I be accused of ungentlemanly behavior, we’ll address a husband’s duty to his wife first, then a wife’s duty toward her husband. But hopefully this is no beating at all, and if it is, the gospel throughout should heal the wounds and, with hearts turned toward Christ, should press us delightfully onto obedience. For those of you perceptively counting pages, having noticed the chapter on a wife’s submission is noticeably longer than this one, this is intentional, though maybe unwise. The issues of husband love and wife submission go hand in hand, so after teaching on each, we’ll apply them substantially together. For now, we focus attention on Ephesians 5:25,

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

The Holy Spirit makes one thing very clear in this verse: A husband cannot understand his duty toward his wife without a thorough knowledge of Christ’s love for the church. Husbands are to love their wives “just as” Christ loved the church, meaning husbands are to love their wives *to the extent or degree to which Christ loved the church*.⁴⁰ Gulp. Our pride is swallowed, or ought to be. Husbands, we must love our wives as Christ loved the church. No, this is not a joke, and Paul is certainly not kidding, or if he is he forgot to mention it.

Notice four aspects of Christ’s love for the church:

1. Christ loves the church *actively*
2. Christ loves the church *personally*
3. Christ loves the church *beneficially*
4. Christ loves the church *impossibly*

Christ loves the church *actively*

Jesus Christ is the subject, the actor, of both verbs describing His relationship with the church: *Christ loved* the church and *gave himself up* for her. The church is the passive recipient of Christ’s love; Christ is the sole actor, the initiator of the relationship between Himself and His bride. Jesus came to *seek* the lost (Luke 10:10), and as the old hymn puts it,

The church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord;

⁴⁰ The Greek word translated “just as” is καθως: “just as...of extent or degree to which, as, to the degree that” (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, 3rd Edition* [BDAG]; p. 493).

She is his new creation by water and the Word:
From heav'n *he came and sought her* to be his holy bride;
With his own blood he bought her, and for her life he died.

Jesus did not love the church by sitting in heaven, arms open, gently calling us to climb heaven's staircase, promising His love if only we would initiate the relationship. The text before us says nothing of the sort. Jesus voluntarily came down to us; *He* made the effort, *He* initiated the relationship between us, and if He had not initiated the relationship, there would be no relationship between Christ and His bride.

I believe, then, that if we husbands are called to love our wives *just as* Christ loved the church, then the general tenor of Christian marriages must be conducted with husbands *seeking* their wives. When the relationship grows cold or distant, husbands should nurture emotional warmth and intimacy; when busy-ness overwhelms the relationship, husbands should provide a reprieve; and when conflict arises, husbands should initiate resolution and reconciliation. Especially in conflict, husbands should *initiate* restoration.

But if you are like me in conflict, you find it easier to withdraw, to shut down, to "hole-up" in a self-protective shell, and, while withdrawn, mentally rehearse poisonous self-righteous thoughts like, "Well; *she* started it and it's all *her* fault. I'll reconcile with my wife when *she* comes to me, when *she* chases me down, when *she* does the work of seeking me." Such thoughts are recipes for disaster, and fall far short of Christ's love for us. Think for a moment, husbands, of Christ's love for you. Did Jesus demand you come find Him in heaven, or did He come down to earth to find you? Did God reconcile us to Himself because we sought reconciliation or because He sent His Son to provide the means for reconciliation? And when Jesus walked on earth, have you considered he was always walking? Do you know why? Because He was *seeking* the lost! Would you, husband, have a restored relationship with God if Jesus Christ kept His seat warm in heaven, saying, "It is all their fault. *They* started it in the Garden. They threw the first punch at Me; they threw the first dagger at Me; they sinned against Me. They must come to me." If Jesus said that, we would still be hell-bound sinners. Praise God He sought us; without His seeking there would be no hope. Husbands, without us seeking out our wives in tumultuous marital times, there is no hope, or very little, for our marriages. Being a husband is hard work, and if the days of your marriage leave you frequently worn out, you are probably doing the ordinary work of marriage.

Christ loves the church *personally*

There are a lot of things which the Holy Spirit could have written behind the word "gave": "Christ loved the church and gave...

...the Holy Spirit to her”
...many gifts to her.”
...the riches of heavenly glory up for her.”

But the only thing mentioned is Himself: He gave *Himself* up for her. Jesus Christ did not write a check for our redemption, or send a pot of gold or silver to redeem us. He ransomed us not with perishable things such as gold or silver, but with His precious blood (1 Peter 1:18-19), with His life, with His person, with His very self.

Jesus' love for the church is a personal love, the love of one person to another. Our relationship with Him is not a mere good and services relationship, but a personal one whereby we obtain Him. In case this appears trivial, think for a moment what the most costly object is which you can give anyone? What does each person possess, which, if given to someone else, costs the giver dearly? The most costly object a person can give is their person: their time, energy, thoughts, presence.

I have no doubt most husbands would lay down their lives for their wives. If there was a car careening toward his wife, the chivalrous husband would jump in front of it and push his wife to safety; if there was a gunman in the home, the husband would stand between he and his wife, taking the bullet; if the couple's plane crashed into a mountain, the husband would starve to death, allowing his wife to eat the food and be rescued; and if the couple was on the Titanic, the husband would surely exchange his seat on the life-boat for death in the frigid water, so she could live. Each husband who encountered G.I. Joe or Mighty Mouse as a child has had such thoughts, but the problem is our roads have curbs, our homes are relatively safe from gunman, planes seldom crash into mountains, and the Titanic...well, think about it. In theory, we could live the entirety of our marriage with such grand thoughts, and yet never give ourselves to our wives. What do our wives need from us? How can we give ourselves personally, in ways they actually, and daily, need us? Brace yourself...

We might help around the house, doing laundry (I'm not good at it either!), the dishes, mopping the floors, changing diapers, or disciplining the children. We might set apart time each day, or somewhat frequently, and provide our wives emotional support, or listen to them, or tell them about our day, or rub her neck, or ask them the things with which they are wrestling. This list could go on, and lest I run the risk of taking the words out of your wife's mouth, why don't you ask her yourself. Ask your wife in what way you could love her more personally. Her answer, if you allow her to answer, and if you listen really carefully, will be quite competent and insightful, which is probably why we avoid asking the question in the first place.

Simply put, men, marriage leaves no room for an aloof or emotionally disconnected husband. Marriage is a personal relationship where a husband

gives his wife *himself*—his life, his time, his energy, his very person. And for the husband who says, “I give my wife a roof over her head, three meals a day, clothes on her back, and spiritual advice from the Bible; therefore I am fulfilling my duty toward her”, please consider that you can give your wife all these things without giving her yourself. If your wife needed merely a roof over her head, she could have stayed at her father’s house, or rented one herself. And if she married you merely to obtain three meals a day, was she starving before you met her? And if you believe she married you to obtain clothing, was she without clothes before you married her? And if she married you merely for spiritual advice, was she spiritually directionless without you?

Sarcasm aside, marriage is much more than, but certainly not less than, putting a roof over our wife’s head and living under it with her. If your view of marriage is simply co-existence, two people living together because they are *officially* married, but *functionally* divorced, then please re-examine your marriage to Jesus. He gave *Himself* to you: you can talk to Him anytime you like; you can approach Him whenever you please; He is never aloof, never distant, never detached. He is always sympathetic to your condition (Hebrews 4:15); are you to the condition of your wife? Do you even know the condition of your wife?

One week prior to the First Battle of Bull Run (Manassas), Major Sullivan Ballou, emotionally torn between his love for his wife and his sense of duty, and knowing he may soon die, took time to say, “I love you” to his wife. Unintentionally, Major Ballou enshrined himself in history not for his heroism or bravery, but for his zealous love for his wife, expressed in this letter:

July 14, 1861

Camp Clark, Washington

My very dear Sarah:

The indications are very strong that we shall move in a few days—perhaps tomorrow. Lest I should not be able to write again, I feel impelled to write a few lines that may fall under your eye when I shall be no more...

I have no misgivings about, or lack of confidence in the cause in which I am engaged, and my courage does not halt or falter. I know how strongly American Civilization now leans on the triumph of the Government, and how great a debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood and sufferings of the Revolution. And I am willing—perfectly willing—to lay down all my joys in this life, to help maintain this Government, and to pay that debt...

Sarah my love for you is deathless, it seems to bind me with mighty cables that nothing but Omnipotence could break; and yet my love of Country comes over me like a strong wind and bears me unresistibly on with all these chains to the battle field.

The memories of the blissful moments I have spent with you come creeping over me, and I feel most gratified to God and to you that I have enjoyed them so long. And hard it is for me to give them up and burn to ashes the hopes of future years, when, God willing, we might still have lived and loved together, and seen our sons grown up to honourable manhood, around us. I have, I know, but few and small claims upon Divine Providence, but something whispers to me—perhaps it is the wafted prayer of my little Edgar, that I shall return to my loved ones unharmed. If I do not my dear Sarah, never forget how much I love you, and when my last breath escapes me on the battle field, it will whisper your name. Forgive my many faults, and the many pains I have caused you. How thoughtless and foolish I have often times been! How gladly would I wash out with my tears every little spot upon your happiness...

But, O Sarah! If the dead can come back to this earth and flit unseen around those they loved, I shall always be near you; in the gladdest days and in the darkest nights...*always, always*, and if there be a soft breeze upon your cheek, it shall be my breath, as the cool air fans your throbbing temple, it shall be my spirit passing by. Sarah do not mourn me dead; think I am gone and wait for thee, for we shall meet again...⁴¹

Sullivan Ballou was killed about one week later at the first battle of Bull Run. But though physically absent from his wife's side, he remained emotionally attached to her. He could not fight a war without thinking of her, caressing her with his mind, and comforting her with his pen. He loved her personally.

Christ loves the church *beneficially*

Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield was born in 1851 near Lexington, KY. He graduated from what is now called Princeton University in 1871 with highest honours, and then from Princeton Theological Seminary in May 1876, and the same year married Annie Pierce Kinkead. While on their honeymoon in Germany, Benjamin and Annie were caught in a fierce storm in which she was hit by lightning and paralyzed. She never recovered, remaining bed-ridden the rest of her life.⁴² Warfield would soon be an internationally renowned theologian, yet in service to his wife he remained stateside, teaching at Princeton Theological Seminary, assuming its presidency in 1887, and seldom teaching for more than 2 hours at a time so he could return home to minister to his wife. He changed the tenor of his calling, from that of attending important meetings and speaking internationally, to that of scholarship, because scholarship allowed him to

⁴¹ *The Civil War: An Illustrated History* by Geoffrey C. Ward with Ric Burns and Ken Burns; pp. 82-83.

⁴² For a brief description of the story, see *Great Leaders of the Christian Church*, edited by John D. Woodbridge (Moody Press, 1988); p. 344.

study in his office, at home, right next to the bed of his wife. This is committed love, devoted love, and is but an infinitely small picture of Jesus' love toward us. We are permanently broken, yet He loves us unconditionally—not for what He can get out of us, but for us, and in ways which personally benefit us.

Why does B.B. Warfield's love for Annie resonate with our hearts? Because it is modelled after Jesus' love for us: Christ loved the church and gave himself up *for* her. Christ gave Himself *for* us: *on behalf of us, for the benefit of us, for the sake of us, for the advantage of us.*

The moment you enter marriage as a husband, you live for the benefit of your wife. Husbands, from the day we marry, we don't make decisions, at least not major ones, without taking into account our wives. And just as it is sinful for our wives to live independently of us, so is it sinful for us to make decision in our marriages which benefit us only.

While in seminary a fellow student, a dear Christian brother, enrolled in classes but left after only one semester. His wife was very unsettled by relocating to a new place, and was not comfortable with the idea of having her husband take a call anywhere in the world where folks speak English. So he left seminary and went back to the place from where they came. This brother, whom each of us loved dearly, and one whom all of us supported in his endeavour for the gospel ministry, made each of us re-evaluate our love for our own wives. He understood true love must take into account his wife, and at this juncture I can hardly resist sounding an applicatory note. Husbands, if you want to destroy your marriages, then make major decisions without the input of your wives. Move to another house or state or country without asking her (you might move alone!); quit your job without consulting her; decide how many children you must have without deliberating with her (good luck on this one); or, in general, do whatever you want, with whomever you want, whenever you want, in whichever way you want. After you have tried this, let me know how it went. Probably not very well. And if this does not convince you of your calling to lay down your life for the benefit of your wife, then hear Christ's dying words from the Cross, for at a moment He should have been far more concerned with himself than with us, He cried out "Father, *forgive them*, for they know not what they do." In utter agony, moments before three hours of darkest hell came raging against Him, Jesus concerned Himself with your forgiveness. Do you know this love? Then love your wife similarly.

Christ loves the church *impossibly*

Here we notice not *how* Christ loved the church, but *who* is the church He loved, for this may be one of the most important details of v. 25.

If we check our hearts, we have likely found this maxim bouncing around, “I will love my wife when...she no longer sins, gets her act together, respects me, becomes altogether lovely, or produces inside me this incredibly warm feeling of love.” But the call of the gospel in marriage is, “Husbands, *love the unlovable*.” Even when they treat us wrongfully, even when they despise us, and even when they cannot stand us. If this is a problem then go look in the mirror and remember: she has to respect a man who is un-respectable! That should help cure our unwillingness to love an unlovable wife. But if it doesn’t, then consider a true story about a husband who loved an impossible wife:

There was a husband who cherished, loved, and gloated over his wife, showing her off to everyone around him, and sacrificing himself on a daily basis. But even amidst his undying, sacrificial love, her heart was cold toward him and their marriage dwindled. When he first asked her to be his wife, she was glad of it. She welcomed their engagement, looked forward to the wedding day, and longed to be in the arms of her husband. But after the wedding, when marital idealism became marital reality, she wanted out. She scorned him, complained against him frequently, and had nothing nice to say to him.

To this man’s great credit, He still loved her. He promised to this lady, for better or for worse, and so he did. He forsook all other women, loved and cherished his wife, always made time for her, always planned special occasions for her, and made much ado about certain times of the calendar year which she adored—birthday, religious holidays, and the like. He did all this while she despised him. The flowers he hand-picked during His walks of prayer were either trashed or left to wilt on the counter where he lovingly placed them—she never watered them; the notes of godly encouragement and love-letters he wrote her were torn to pieces and left on the counter as tokens of her animosity; his kisses met firmly pressed lips, and his hugs embraced cold shoulders, her arms always stiff between them; and the time he made available to spend with her was spent prying words out of her until, at last, he believed it more godly not to pry.

To be sure, some days were better than others, but for the most part she made no time for him, hung out with her friends, and surrogated him with the spouse of career. As a result, he often sat alone at the kitchen table, candles burned down to the holder, and her favourite suppers he so lovingly made dry in the oven or cold on the table. As time went on, he cynically reasoned he should cook for one, not two, but could never bring himself to do it...he loved her so much that if she walked through the door once—even once—he wanted her to see him eagerly anticipating her as the prodigal father anticipated his prodigal son. But, most nights ended with him packaging up the food, blowing out the candles, and waiting on the couch only to have his drunk wife come staggering through the door half-dressed, smelling like another man, and sexually satisfied by the romance of another. He could not help but cry; he knew he had to love her more radically to win her, so he did.

One day he planned a special occasion. He took Friday off work to spend with his wife. He was determined to win his wife's affection. He did not tell his wife, and on Friday morning he woke up early to prepare the house. He decorated the living room, spread rose-pedals on the carpet, made her favourite breakfast, and called her boss to tell her she was taking a personal day. He even dusted the furniture, just as she liked it.

When she awoke, the entire house was decorated in flowers and apple-smelling candles. The table was set, her favourite breakfast was in the oven, and her husband met her in the bedroom doorway with a smile, a dozen roses, and a kiss to let her know it was really him and not a dream. Surely she would melt under his persevering love.

Well, she endured it for a few hours: his company, his love, his care and coddling, but by mid-morning she had enough and decided to find a more permanent way to remove him from her life. She liked the benefits of being married to him (freedom, a big house, a nice car, and the social benefits of hanging out with other married couples), but those benefits no longer outweighed the burden of marriage. She was sick of him.

She put up with his relentless love; she tolerated his sacrifice; she observed this man die for her; and she hoped he would abandon her and make their divorce his fault. But his love for her only grew, so, that Friday afternoon, when he was trying so hard to win her love, she decided the only way to get rid of him was to kill him. And she did. Two shots in the head, and one in the chest just to make sure, she ended it with deep satisfaction. In fact, she attended the funeral only to make sure he was really dead, really buried, and totally incapable of being alive, lest she have to endure more of his love. Attending his funeral brought her closure, and, sickeningly so, joy.

Well, the question arises, "What next? Was she thrown in jail? Was she punished for her husband's murder? What happened next?" This: He rose from the dead and told his apostles to go to the wife that killed Him and preach repentance and forgiveness. Upon hearing this kind of love, she repented and believed in Him.

You see, brothers, ever since God brought Israel out of Egypt, she has been crying, "*I want a divorce!*" She complained that the food was much better when single back in Egypt;⁴³ she told God she preferred whoring around with false gods than intimacy with our gracious God.⁴⁴ When Jesus sent her love-letters (prophets), she tore them up (killed them);⁴⁵ when Jesus brought her flowers (prosperous times) she forgot Him; and when Jesus made an incredible meal for her she ate, got fat, and turned away from Him.⁴⁶ The husband is Jesus Christ, we are the bride, and Paul says to Christian husbands, "Love your wives *just as Christ loved the church.*" How

⁴³ Exodus 16:3.

⁴⁴ Hosea 1:2; 2:2,5,13; 3:1-3.

⁴⁵ Matthew 23:37.

⁴⁶ Deuteronomy 31:20; 32:15.

did Christ love His wife? By dying for a Bride that hated Him. When that melts our hearts, we will start to see ourselves *in* our wives' disrespect, catching a glimpse of what we looked like to Christ as He hung on the Cross amid our mocking. We, my brothers, are the scandalous wife; we are the husband-rejecting bride. We whore after other husbands (money, career, approval, possessions, success), while Jesus Christ serves us with His entire life. Every time we come back to Him, smelling like another lover, He loves us. And each time we faithlessly live as though we wish He were dead, He is faithful to pursue us.

I wonder how many of us believe Jesus looked down from the Cross, thinking, "You know, I have this incredibly warm and fuzzy feeling for all of you right now. Though you mis-try Me, flog Me, throw a cross on My back, crucify Me, mock and jeer Me, and treat me like the scum of the earth, I feel a strong, emotional connection with you, and on that basis, I lay down My life for you." I doubt He thought that; the crowds before Him were not loveable, and certainly fostered no feelings of intimacy inside Jesus. Yet He loved them with an unconquerable love. The people who, in response to Peter's sermon about 43 days after Jesus died, repented, could not have mounted a more calculated and persistent effort to extinguish God's sacrificial love for us. But it did not work. God's love for us in Christ cannot be extinguished. It overcomes every obstacle, every hurdle, every barrier. My fellow, Christian husbands, to this we have been called. Let us love our wives similarly, drawing strength to love our wives from Christ's love for us. And when it feels like our wives are opposed to us, making every effort to rid themselves of our presence, remember the resolve with which Christ loved you, His bride, and particularly remember some of the last words resounding through Jesus' head as He died for His bride, "Crucify him, crucify him!" Only when you have been loved by the Ultimate Lover of souls, will you love this way.

I know some of us will explain this away, noting how unworthy are our wives to receive such love. You're correct in that they are unworthy, but you are very wrong in thinking you were somehow worthy of Christ's dying love for you. We were in no way worthy of Jesus' love, yet he gave it freely, voluntarily, and lavishly to us, at infinite cost to Himself. When this melts us, we will begin to love our wives the same way.

The Self-Sacrifice of Marriage

A Wife's Submission

The word “submission” is likened to oppression, cruelty, enslavement, and dangerous vulnerability. To pretend such associations don't exist would be to minimize sin. Sin has tyrannized every institution of authority; marriage is no exception, and is probably the rule for tyrannical use of authority. Wives who submit themselves to a husband may become financially vulnerable if they exchange a lucrative career, or a substantial resume, for motherhood; wives who submit themselves to a husband may become relationally vulnerable if the demands of marriage and stress of child-rearing leave little time for maintaining fitness and form, causing physical beauty to deteriorate; and wives who submit themselves to a husband may become physically vulnerable if they marry a man stronger than they. It is not surprising that a wife's “submission” elicits emotionally charged responses from the public square, and from Christians themselves. But as the old saying goes, “An abuse does not negate proper use.” Or, to put it another way, the way submissive wives have been abused throughout the history of the world does not mean the problem lies in a wife's submission.

This chapter will concentrate on Ephesians 5:22-24, but it should be borne in mind the teaching of a wife's submission is not confined to this passage: it is taught in numerous places:

Wives, *submit* to your own husbands, as to the Lord...let the wife see that she respects her husband.

Ephesians 5:22,33

Wives, *submit* to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

Colossians 3:18

Wives, *be subject* to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct.

1 Peter 3:1-2

[Older women] are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children...and *to be submissive* to their own husbands.

Titus 2:4-5

The chapter unfolds this way:

1. What is submission?
2. Why is submission so difficult?
3. Why is submission necessary?
4. How can it be done?
5. Where do we go from here?

What is submission?

The Greek word for submission is composed of two words: “under” and “to appoint.” Thus the word translated “submission” means, quite literally, to appoint under, to affix under, or to arrange under.

In military contexts, commanding officers would appoint or “draw up” soldiers for battle.⁴⁷ If you were a soldier, you went where your commanding officer appointed you—you were directed by another. In marriage, however, the command is not, “Husbands, appoint or direct your wives as though they were soldiers under your command.” Rather, “Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands.” The injunction “to submit” is directed to wives, not husbands, and therefore entails the crucial element of voluntariness. Paul’s instructions to wives might be paraphrased this way, “Wives, you must voluntarily place yourselves under your husbands. It is not for your husband to require this of you, but for you to require it of yourself.” From this we derive a definition of a wife’s submission: to voluntarily place herself under the authority of her husband. The instruction is simple. Living it out is difficult.

Why is submission so difficult?

Wives, the Lord could not have asked you to do anything harder. As the hardest thing for a husband is laying down his life in selfless sacrifice for his wife, so the hardest thing for a wife is submitting herself to her husband. Why is it so hard to submit to your husband? One word: Sin. One event: the Fall. One result: the Curse.

Immediately after Adam and Eve fell into sin, God lined up Satan, Adam, and Eve for the sobering announcement of sin’s curse. Of particular interest to us are the effects of the curses, all of which are with us today, and especially the curse relevant to wives in Genesis 3:16:

To the woman the LORD God said, “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. *Your desire shall be for your husband*, and he shall rule over you.”

The key phrase, “Your desire shall be for your husband”, has no shortage of interpretations, but two stand particularly tall. The first one reads the phrase this way: “Your desire shall be to look to your husband to fulfill in you things only God Himself can fill. You will have an inordinate desire to seek emotional, spiritual, and psychological fulfillment from your husband rather than from Christ.” In other words, wives will tend to idolize a husband’s love, and, since he will never love her perfectly, she will never

⁴⁷ See the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1972), Volume 8; pp. 27-48, especially the word *τασσω*.

have enough of him, and eventually, if she keeps looking to him to satisfy her soul, she will have had too much of him, and be fed up with him. Therefore, if a husband loves his wife well, all will be well, for a short while; but if a husband loves her poorly, all will be poor, and disappointing, and emotionally devastating. The meaning of the curse, then, is wives will desire their husbands *too much*, and, functionally, will tend to replace God with their husbands. Without discounting the validity of this interpretation, I think a stronger case can be made for the second interpretation, though wives should pay careful attention to the first.

The second one reads the phrase this way: “Your desire shall be *against* your husband, to control him by competing with him for ascendancy in marriage.” The relationship between sin and Cain supports this conclusion:

If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. *Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.*

Genesis 4:7 uses the same Hebrew words to describe sin’s relationship to Cain as Genesis 3:16 does to describe Eve’s relationship to Adam. Sin’s desire for Cain is to dominate, to control, overtake, to overrule Cain, but Cain must rule over sin. In much the same way, a wife desires to rule over her husband in order to control or dominate the marriage, but the husband will rule over her.

What [Genesis] 4:7 describes is sin’s attempt to control and dominate Cain. Because his offering has been rejected by God he is seething with anger. In such an emotional state he is easy prey for sin which crouches lionlike and wants to jump on him. Cain is to fight back, turn the tables, and dominate sin and its desire. Applied to [Genesis] 3:16, the desire of the woman for her husband is akin to the desire of sin that lies poised ready to leap at Cain. It means a desire to break the relationship of equality and turn it into a relationship of servitude and domination. The sinful husband will try to be a tyrant over his wife. Far from being a reign of co-equals over the remainder of God’s creation, the relationship now becomes a fierce dispute, with each party trying to rule the other. The two who once reigned as one attempt to rule each other.⁴⁸

Simply put, wives, the curse imposed by God in the Garden of Eden means your tendency will be to overturn your husband’s authority in order to gain control of him. In other words, you will probably feel the effects of Eve’s first sin every day.

It may be encouraging, ladies, that Paul understood the difficult nature of sin’s curse on you, and so in his letter to Titus wrote,

Older women, likewise are...to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure,

⁴⁸ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* (Eerdmans, 1990. NICOT); pp. 201-202.

working at home, kind, and *submissive to their own husbands*, that the word of God may not be reviled.

Titus 2:3

If submission were easy, Paul probably would not have gone out of his way to command older Christian women, who have learned to submit to their own husbands, to train younger Christian wives how to submit to their husbands. This suggests, of course, that submission to one's husband takes a lifetime to learn.

Why is submission necessary?

In any organization of two or more people, there must be a leader, or group of leaders, who has final say. If one person is appointed the leader, then he/she dictates the direction of the company, and if a group of people lead, then they lead by vote, and once the vote is cast, the company moves in that direction.

Marriage is no different. If God established marriage to be two people battling for ascendancy, then the outcome of every marital debate would be decided by he/she who yells the loudest, or throws the biggest tantrum, or is trained in manipulation, etc. We can give God thanks He has not abandoned us to such devices, but has instilled in the very fabric of marriage the means for making decisions: "The husband is the head of the wife" (Ephesians 5:23).

Anyone who has been married longer than the honeymoon will know why God designated one spouse—the husband—head of the marriage. In a company of two people, when the two disagree, there must either be a third party (which there isn't in marriage) or a deciding vote which breaks the tie. God has given husbands authority to break the tie; C.S. Lewis explains:

The need for some head follows from the idea that marriage is permanent. Of course, as long as the husband and wife are agreed, no question of a head need arise; and we may hope that this will be the normal state of affairs in a Christian marriage. But when there is a real disagreement, what is to happen? Talk it over, of course; but I am assuming they have done that and still failed to reach agreement. What do they do next? They cannot decide by a majority vote, for in a council of two there can be no majority. Surely, only one or other of two things can happen: either they must separate and go their own ways or else one or other of them must have a casting vote. If marriage is permanent, one or other party must, in the last resort, have the power of deciding the family policy. You cannot have a permanent association without a constitution.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. NY: HarperCollins, 2001; p. 113.

Because marriage is permanent, there must be a way to break a tie. If there is no way to break a tie, then the marriage relationship cannot be permanent. Do you see how wise God is? He has designed for marriage a constitution, a system by which the marriage can operate and be sustained. In any relationship with two people, there must either be (1) agreement all the time (not likely), or (2) a parting of ways when disagreement occurs, or (3) someone designated to cast the deciding vote. In marriage, God has not left us to our own devices, but has invested the husband with tie-breaking authority.

Now, this does not mean a husband should make decisions on his own apart from his wife, and it certainly does not mean a husband can do whatever he pleases and his wife must follow along like a puppy-dog. Decision making is a team effort in marriage. Call it deliberation, call it a family benefitting from the collective wisdom of two brains, or call it a think-tank, but whatever you call it, don't call it the husband having it his way. Husbands, in every major life decision (ask your wife if it is major), we should ask our wives for input, weigh it carefully, discuss every viable option with them, pray with them, and make every effort to come to an agreement. Ideally, husband and wife should never make a major life decision they disagree on—I say this is the *ideal*, and should be diligently sought. It may mean you take extra time to pray, or discuss, or ask others for advice, but unity of mind should be the goal. However, at the end of the day, when all the rocks have been overturned, and no agreement has been reached, it is the husband's obligation to make a final decision, and the wife's obligation to acquiesce to his decision. By the way, headship is for the sustenance and health of marriage, for without it, there could be no lasting relationship. Without it, the moment spouses disagree on something substantial, the marriage begins to end. God knows that without headship, marriage is impossible.

And now, wives, for encouragement in your endeavor to submit yourself to a sinful husband, here are words from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a 20th century German, Lutheran pastor, about the benefits a wife should enjoy under the headship of her husband:

As the head, it is [the husband] who is responsible for his wife, for their marriage, and for their home. On him falls the care and protection of the family; he represents it to the outside world; he is its mainstay and comfort; he is the master of the house, who exhorts, punishes, helps, and comforts, and stands for it before God.⁵⁰

How can it be done?

⁵⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison: The Enlarged Edition*. NY: Touchstone, 1997; p. 45.

“Submission”, so we are told, “is the wimp’s way out.” It is allowing someone else to come over us, and that can only mean weakness; or worse, cowardliness; or worst, vulnerability. But what if submission is the greatest display of strength there is, and what if becoming vulnerable is the greatest test of courage known to man? No one would deny that submission involves acquiescence to another, but Christians would deny that such acquiescence is wimpish; and no one would deny that submission entails vulnerability, but Christians would deny that such vulnerability derives from weakness. Any wimp can rebel against authority, and any weakling can do whatever he wants, but only someone courageous can submit to authority. stagger

Don’t believe it? Listen to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. The cup of God’s wrath against our sin was placed in front of Him, He caught a glimpse of the Cross, and He asked the Father if there was another way to save us, and if so, if that way could replace the way of the Cross. Like a drunken man staggers under the influence of alcohol, Jesus staggered under the pain of God’s cup of wrath (Isaiah 51:17,22-23). He momentarily balked; He hesitated; He recoiled; He wobbled. And with all creation groaning, with every angel looking breathlessly on, and with the Holy Spirit, as it were, driving Him through the hellishly painful sentence, in the greatest display of strength ever known to mankind, Jesus finished the prayer, “Not as I will, but as you will” (Matthew 26:39). The worlds breathed a sigh of relief, and so do we. Jesus a wimp? Jesus a submissive weakling? Not a chance: Jesus Christ, the anti-wimp, submitted His life to the Cross to redeem us from our wimpishness. And in so doing, Jesus proved that true strength lies in submission, and true redemption lies in coming under the will of another.

Wives, submitting to and respecting a perfect husband would be hard enough, but rest assured, you’re husband is a very sinful man. This makes your calling all the more difficult, but not impossible. And, if you feed your soul with a regular diet of the good news of Jesus Christ, submission can become for you a delight. Here is how.

The hardest part of submission is it makes you feel less valuable to God, but you must know that Jesus Christ submitted Himself to God and was ruined that you might become infinitely valuable to God. Submission will not ruin you; in fact, it is submission, the submission of Christ to the Father’s will, which has made you infinitely valuable to God! Submission is redemptive!

Way down deep, if you are honest with yourselves, wives, submission feels like abandonment of your worth, abandonment of your glory, abandonment of your standing with God. So what you need more than anything else in all the world is to taste this good news: Jesus Christ became a worthless curse, to make you of infinite worth to God; Jesus Christ

became utterly inglorious, to make you glorious; and Jesus Christ, on the Cross, momentarily lost His standing with His Father, so that you might gain a righteous standing with His Father. And do you know how He accomplished this for you? By *submitting* Himself to His Father. On the Cross, Jesus was *truly* ruined so that your feeling of being ruined is only *apparent*.

Christian wives, the Garden of Gethsemane is like no other place for you to lay your heart, mind, will, and emotions. Lay them at Jesus' feet and listen to His struggle on your behalf. When you see Him submit His body and soul to the Father's hellish wrath, in order to rescue you from hell itself, submission will no longer be something you *have* to do, but *want* to do, in service to the Savior who died so willingly for you. If Jesus failed to submit to the Cross, you would be lost; if you refuse to submit to your husband, your marriage will falter. But Jesus loved you so much He walked straight into a cruel death because He could not bear the thought of losing you forever. This how He loves you; do you love Him?

Where do we go from here?

Now we apply the doctrine of submission and headship using practical suggestions and illustrations.

First: Husbands, headship is not a command to *do* something, but to *be* something; headship is a status conferred, not a status to be earned. Put another way, the Bible nowhere tells husbands, "*Be* the head of your wife." Rather, it says, "*You are* the head of your wife." Once a husband and wife say, "I do" at the wedding altar, the husband *is* the head of his wife. This is helpful, husbands, in this regard: you should not try to become the head of your home by lording your authority over your wife. You *already are* the head of your home, and, as such, have been given only one command, "*Love* your wife as Christ loved the church." Love, not lording, is the duty of your headship.

Second: Husbands, if you and your wife disagree about something, and you decide to follow your wife's preference, then you must know that your decision to follow her preference is your decision—you are responsible for it, and must take responsibility for it. If that decision should prove costly to you, you should never come back on her, saying, "This is your fault; this was all your idea; you are to blame." If you relocate to a city which your wife preferred, and your lives fall apart while there, it was ultimately your decision to move there, and so, if blame must be assigned, you must protect your wife by taking the blame.

Third: Husbands, our wives submit to us "*as to the Lord*." Do you know what this means? It means (brace yourself) our wives may be submitting to us only because they love the Lord! They are not called to submit to us

because we are smarter, or wiser, or have better ideas; in fact, if you have eyes to see, you will often find the decisions you made, against the better judgment of your wife, decisions which she submitted to, were wrong and unwise. We should be humbled by this fact. Wives, you should bear continually in mind that your Savior does not ask you to submit to your husband because he is smarter, wiser, or better at making decisions than you are. He may be far worse at it than you; but he is your head. It may be helpful to memorize this phrase (though I wouldn't recommend using it in front of your husband, unless, of course, you think he might benefit from hearing it...): "Lord, this one's for You!" It may come in handy when you're husband asks you to do something idiotic.

Fourth: Husbands, it is worth bearing in mind that Jesus does not tell our wives to *agree* with us, but to submit to us. There is a vast expanse between the two. Our calling is not to spend countless hours in persuasive speech trying to convince them we are right. Submission is not agreement: *our wives are free, at every moment, to disagree with us*. And wives, please remember Jesus is not asking you to submit to your husband only when you agree with him, but even when you disagree with him.

Fifth: Wives, in light of the previous paragraph, marry someone to whom you can submit, meaning, marry a man you respect; marry a man you trust will spurn you to godliness; marry a man you believe will make prayerful decision, in conjunction with you, asking your input; don't, if you can help it, marry a tyrant.

Sixth: Wives, you can do nothing to change the God-ordained fact that your husband is the head of your marriage. This means no matter your intelligence, your income, your capabilities, or your social standing in the community, your husband is your head. If you make \$150,000/year compared to your husband's measly \$50,000/year, and if you graduated Harvard School of Law but your husband graduated only high school, and if you are a social butterfly of high standing in the community but your husband is not, he is still your head, and you must submit to him.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones used to preach in a certain church in the provinces of England, and after preaching would stay at the home of the minister and his wife. He recounts that staying with them was always interesting because from the standpoint of sheer ability, the wife far exceeded the husband. Though he was exceptionally friendly and kind, she far excelled him in intellectual ability, and had the academic degree to prove it. But what struck Lloyd-Jones was not so much her grasp of intellectual matters—although it impressed him—but what especially struck him was how this incredibly capable wife, far more capable in nearly every way than her husband, honored him. He tells the story this way:

I do not know that I have ever seen anything more wonderful than the way in which that woman always put her husband into his true Scriptural

position. She did it in a very clever and subtle way. She would put arguments into his mouth; but she always did so in such a way as to suggest that they were his, and not hers! There is an amusing aspect to the matter, but I am reporting it as one of the moving and tremendous things I have ever experienced. She was not only an able woman, she was a Christian woman, and she was putting into operation this principle that the husband is the head. He always had to state the decision though she had supplied him with the reasons. She was acting as a help meet for him. She had the qualities that he lacked; she was complementing, she was supplementing him. But the husband was the head, and the children were always referred to him. She was guarding his position.⁵¹

Seventh: Wives, you are to submit to your own husbands, not to all men in general. There is one man on the planet, not your father, not your brother, and not your son, but your husband only, to whom you are called to submit.

Eighth: Wives, you are to submit to your husband *in everything*. Now, this phrase, in our day, has become so overqualified as to have lost its meaning, but God meant it when He said it. You are not required to submit to your husband if he is asking you to sin, or if he is sinning grievously against you (through such things as abuse, abandonment, or adultery). But in all other instances, your loving Savior calls you to honor Him by submitting to your husband. Elisabeth Elliot made the following comment about the simplicity of Ephesians 5:22, submitting in everything:

Many are the discussions I've heard on this one, almost all of them directed to what it "can't possibly mean," rather than to the plain word of the Lord. The statement is simple. Not easy for women like me, but simple, that is, I understand it only too well. (As Mark Twain said, "I have far more trouble with the things I do understand in the Bible than things I don't understand.")

And brothers, we should be very careful what we ask of our wives, for the sake of their conscience and their sanity. Their calling to submit is not our permission to ask of them whatever we want. If we love our wives, and we must love them, we will put ourselves in their shoes before we ask things of them.

Ninth: Wives, adorn yourselves with a gentle and quiet spirit. The cavalier, independent, obnoxious wife, no matter how successful she has become, or is becoming, is not a pleasing aroma to the God who saved her:

Let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious.

1 Peter 3:4

⁵¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Life In The Spirit: In Marriage, Home & Work*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003; pp. 110-111.

Finally, wives, hereafter is a bold summary of what submission is *not*, written by Jennifer Smidt, the wife of Mars Hill Church Pastor Phil Smidt,

Biblical Submission Is NOT:

1. *Simply or singularly a marriage issue*: Submission is God's design. It is a reflection of the interaction within the Trinity. Whether single or married, submission is a core heart issue revealing one's dependence upon God. For a wife, it demonstrates her willingness to yield to her husband's lead in obedience and belief of God's covenant to her.
2. *Degrading*: Women have been lured into believing that submission is somehow humiliating. It does not bestow second-class status. It was Christ's glory to submit to his father's plan of redemption for his children; it is a wife's glory to submit to God's plan of provision and protection for her life.
3. *Silent*: When submission is depicted as voiceless oppression, both men and women lose. God declared that men need help and to leave them without our prayerful input is to deny them help – the very thing God declared they need. Submission uses her voice to speak words of grace and life into her husband's life.
4. *Fearful*: A fearful woman will have a very hard time submitting to her husband. A fearful woman isn't actively trusting God with her life which makes entrusting a man with your future nearly impossible. Submission to Christ frees a woman from fear as she rests in God's character and provision for her delivered through her husband.
5. *Joyless*: A joyless wife is an ungrateful wife. Submission says, as Jesus did, "Not my will but yours be done." There is great joy found in doing the will of God. Even in the most difficult of circumstances, joy bubbles out of a heart that is thankful to God for who he is and what he gives.
6. *Stifling*: When submissive women are portrayed as stunted or limited in their freedom, they are being lied about. Submission is a safe place of protection where we are able to express our gifts and creativity for the glory of God and benefit of our marriages.
7. *Dumb*: It is not a dumb thing to do, nor does it make you dumb. There is no "I get to check my brain at the door because he is in charge" thinking as the world often portrays. Submission is the response of an intelligent woman who knows her Bible and believes that God's design is best.
8. *Weak*: Submissive women are not mousy. They will not settle for doormat status. The posture of submission is strength willingly placed under the authority of another. Our husbands need our best. Our best is the power that comes from Christ alone as we depend on him to embody Christlikeness to our men.
9. *Automatic*: A submissive spirit does not kick in the moment you say, "I do". It is a heart response that all women begin to cultivate as we submit to Christ first. Wives will have their hearts exposed in the area of submission to God. A wife who submits cheerfully and graciously to her husband will always have at her core a heart knelt in submission to Christ.

10. *Self-Focused*: A truly submissive heart doesn't need to be concerned with taking care of herself. The submitted heart does not ask, "What's in it for me?" but rather, "How can I serve God and my husband with my life?"⁵²

Objection

My husband uses his headship to make me feel inferior. Isn't the very nature of a husband headship designed in such a way that wives are forced to feel inferior?

No. In fact, quite the opposite is the case. Husbands are to show honor to their wives as the weaker vessel (1 Peter 3:7), and by so doing, elevate their wives to a superior place. If a husband is using his headship to make his wife feel inferior, he is misusing his headship. Headship is for the protection and love of his wife, not the exploitation of his wife. As Christ uses His headship over the church to love, beautify, and exalt her, not demean her, so the husband must use his headship to love and exalt his wife, not make her feel inferior.

Question #1

"I understand that I have a different role than my husband, and I believe these different roles necessary to sustain a marriage. However, I don't understand how I am as valuable as my husband if my role is submission. It seems to me like my role makes me less valuable in God's sight. Am I?"

Different roles in marriage have nothing to do with equality or self-worth. Both husbands and wives are image-bearers, and thus equally valuable and praiseworthy in Christ. If submission means lesser value, then Jesus Christ is of lesser value than the Father, and the Holy Spirit is of lesser value than both the Father and the Son. And if headship means greater value, then the Father is of greater value than the Son. Such notions are false, and certainly not Christian. A husband's role is love; the wife's role is submission and respect. The husband is neither more or less valuable than his wife; neither is the wife more or less valuable than the husband.

"I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and *the head of Christ is God.*"

1 Corinthians 11:3

The head of Christ is God. Does God's headship over Christ make Jesus less valuable than the Father? Not at all. Likewise in marriage:

⁵² Jennifer Smidt, *What Biblical Submission Is Not*. Can be found online at: <http://theresurgence.com/2011/05/16/10-things-submission-is-not>.

The wife is not inferior to her husband; she is different. She has her own peculiar position, full of honour and respect. That is why the man is later to be told to cherish and to nourish and to love and to care for, and to respect and honour his wife. There is no inferiority involved.⁵³

Question #2

“I am so bogged down by the call to submission, that it sucks every ounce of joy and pleasure out of my marriage. I can’t do it, or at least not well. I always compete with my husband, and am ready to give up altogether. The whole thing feels like an unbearable weight crushing me to the ground. What can I do?”

It may be very helpful to know a tiny little phrase tucked away in Colossians 3:18, “Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting *in the Lord*.” The highlighted phrase connotes *identity*, meaning, a Christian wife is, first and foremost, a *Christian*, whose identity is found not in the quality of her submission, but in the Savior who gave His life for her.

[Submission as is fitting in the Lord] is the attitude and behaviour which is proper for members of the fellowship of *those who have owned Jesus as Lord*.⁵⁴

This may sound like a peccadillo, and maybe it is, but I believe it important that wives understand the proper motivation for submitting to their husbands. If you, my Christian sister, submit to your husband to acquire a reputation in church or society as a godly woman, your submission will soon falter. God’s love for you in Christ is not determined by the quality of your submission, but by the quality of Christ’s blood. You are in Him; He owns you and loves you. On that basis, and that basis alone, you must submit to your husband. If you submit to your husband for any other reason, then you will either despair when you fail or grow unimaginably proud when you temporarily succeed. God is much more gracious to you than you realize. He has already established your identity in Christ; therefore, He does not love you more or less depending upon how you submit. Jesus took upon Himself your worthless, sinful, miserable identity, and paid for it at the Cross, in order that He might give you *His* identity, His righteousness, His standing with the Father. You’re in! You’re accepted! Isn’t that freeing? Your eternal destiny does not depend upon the quality of your submission.

⁵³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Life In The Spirit: In Marriage, Home & Work*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003; p. 125.

⁵⁴ Martha King, *An Exegetical Summary of Colossians*, 2nd ed.; p. 284 (italics, mine).

The Purpose of Marriage

An Intentional Relationship

Contrary to popular belief, marriage is not a human invention designed to make you happy, but God's institution to make you holy. This reality sends shockwaves through marriage early on, usually right after the honeymoon, and when this happens, the spouse in turmoil replaces the question once posed by a newspaper, "What's Wrong with the World?" with "What's Wrong with My Marriage?" The only correct answer to both questions is the one G.K. Chesterton gave the newspaper editors, "Dear Sirs: I am. Sincerely yours, G.K. Chesterton." Alas, marriage is hard work, for it exposes both spouses for what they really are. Many spouses blame the "marriage" for marital problems, but "marriage" cannot be the real problem. "Marriage" is not a person to be blamed; it is, rather, a relationship composed of two people. And though people often refer to their "marriage" as if it was a third person responsible for all the pain and suffering in their life, marriage is not the name of a problematic person in your life. Either you, your spouse, or both of you are the problem with your marriage.

There is, in all marriages, much work to do, and the work is of a personal nature. Cleaning up another person, and being cleaned up, which is the prerequisite for cleaning up the other, is no easy task. The Cedars of Lebanon usually embed quickly and stubbornly in eyes which formerly saw clearly and accurately, or so we thought. And hypocrisy, that recurrent nuisance of a guest, hides from our eyes the glaring sins we commit, but simultaneously opens our eyes to the peccadilloes our spouse commits. Upon occasion we wake up to our hypocrisy, usually only momentarily, and usually only when startled by a comment like, "It takes one to know one", but quickly we rescind into duplicity, content residing in our imaginary world where everyone else needs cleaning but us. Marital laziness sets in for a while, and a while longer, until Jesus jolts us back to life with another startling comment from our spouse, almost always a true one. And one day, hopefully soon, we find that all along we have disliked in our spouse that which we most excellently cherished, and masterfully hid, or tried to, in ourselves.

It is no accident these words—"that he might sanctify her, having cleanse her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:26-27)—occur in the context of Paul's address to husbands. Husbands have the primary responsibility to provide an intentional, thoughtful, nurturing, edifying atmosphere for their wives. Wives, indeed, must participate in cleansing of their husbands, but I suggest that in addressing the husbands, Paul is laying the primary burden of creating such an atmosphere upon the husbands.

Ever since Adam fell into sin, this has been most difficult. Consider these words from Walter Chantry:

Adam's first family utterances as a fallen man are shocking. His attitude toward marriage had been profoundly reversed. Ignobly he answered God's searching inquiry about their sin with, "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree" (Genesis 3:12)! It would not be surprising if such a selfish remark incited a family brawl that night.

The fallen male mind is fully exposed in Adam's self-centred remark. Throughout the history of our fallen race men have abused women rather than nourished and cherished them. Selfish cruelty to wives has provoked self-defence in women and driven them to carnal responses in kind. Mental divorce of woman by the man is at the root of marital grief.

Desperate to have some time for himself, a husband retreats behind newspaper or television set or into bar rooms after his day's work. No communication is made from the head to his body (his wife). If she does not serve his interests, he becomes angry with her self-defence; but never does he take time to confer with her and to divulge his deepest concerns. Nor is an attentive heart directed to her signals of suffering or neglect. By his lead the two are no longer heirs of one life but strangers in a fractured existence. This tragic pattern, repeated to the misery of multitudes, begins with man's failure to recognize that his wife has been made by God a part of himself (Ephesians 5:33). His private ego is too demanding to allow room for another as co-heir of his own intimate life.⁵⁵

And then it happens. We realize there is much work to be done in marriage, so we do it, finally, initially hesitantly, and eventually willingly. Yes, indeed, marriage has a purpose, and will require of us hard work. Three purposes in particular:⁵⁶

1. Correlation: oneness and opposition
2. Beautification: washing one another
3. Presentation: preparing one another

Correlation: oneness and opposition

Throughout creation week, the Holy Spirit repeatedly declares, "And God saw that it was good."⁵⁷ And after God made man, He declared that His creative work was "*very good*" (Genesis 1:31), indicating that mankind was the climax of all creation, the cream of God's creative crop.

But soon after creation we encounter a problem. The problem is not sin, for it occurs before the fall into sin, but is loneliness:

Then the LORD God said, "It is *not* good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."

⁵⁵ Walter Chantry, *The Shadow of the Cross*. Banner of Truth, 2009, pp. 52-54.

⁵⁶ For a more fulsome, and confessionally Reformed, treatment of the purpose of marriage, see Appendix 2.

⁵⁷ Genesis 1:4,10,12,18,21,25.

Adam had no one who fit him. He had no companion to whom he could relate. And whether or not Adam realized it, his naming of all the animals further confirmed that nothing in all creation existed to satisfy him relationally. Indeed, after Adam named all the animals, we are told, “there was not found a helper fit for him” (Genesis 2:20). God, so to speak, aroused Adam’s hunger for a mate, for as Adam named the animals he soon found that though he ruled over them, they had something he had not: companionship. Then God acted.

Putting Adam into a deep sleep, God surgically removed one of Adam’s ribs from his side, and from the rib “made” or “built” Eve. Adam, to say the least, was delighted. Now he had a companion, a helper fit for him, a helper corresponding to him.

But what does the Bible mean when it speaks of Eve as “a helper fit”⁵⁸ for Adam? It means someone who simultaneously helps Adam and opposes Adam, someone who completes him and competes with him, someone who correlates to him and who contradicts him. Robert Alter, a Hebrew scholar, explains:

The Hebrew *‘ezer kenegdo* (King James Version “help meet”) is notoriously difficult to translate. The second term means “alongside him,” “opposite him,” “a counterpart to him.” “Help” is too weak because it suggests a merely auxiliary function, whereas *‘ezer* elsewhere connotes active intervention on behalf of someone, especially in military contexts, as often in the Psalms.⁵⁹

What Eve was to Adam, then, is a helper designed to intervene on behalf of Adam and who simultaneously stands in front of him to oppose him. When these two ideas are combined, Eve to Adam is someone who opposes him for his good, contradicts him for his benefit, and intervenes on his behalf to help him in his work, even if intervention means respectfully differing with or opposing Adam.

Correlation in marriage is simultaneously mutuality and conflict, harmony and disagreement, togetherness and tug-of-war, completion and competitiveness, oneness and opposition, support and struggle. Spouses exist to oppose each other for their own good, and to be of a tremendous help to each other even as they disagree with each other. It is, ironically, disagreement and opposition which molds and shapes us beneficially. Let’s explore God’s design for correlation in marriage.

What are your manners and mood like when you are in private versus in public? I am guessing that they are, like most peoples, distinct, though not necessarily hypocritically so. In private we tend to be more like ourselves than we are when around other people. Marriage puts an

⁵⁸ Genesis 2:18,20.

⁵⁹ Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*. NY: Norton, 2004; p. 22.

interesting end to that, or tries to. When, in the privacy of your spouse's company, you live in manner and mood like you would if they were absent, you drive your spouse bonkers to the extent you have to change. Their presence in your private life, and all of life, drastically affects how you "relax" or "unwind" in the privacy of your home. Most spouses adjust their manners accordingly, taking into courteous account the presence of their spouse by neglecting certain obnoxious habits, and adding to their repertoire loving gestures. Those who fail to adjust on their own are usually chastised by their spouse and, over the course of time, molded and shaped, for good, by the courteous opposition of their spouse. What is happening? We are being shaped by oneness and opposition.

Another example of being simultaneously one and opposed is Adam's wedding song:

This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.

Genesis 2:23

The English translation makes Adam sound like he was desperate for companionship, "This *at last*..." He was. Adam celebrated as though life without Eve was an eternal loneliness, nearly unbearable. And Adam wastes no time letting God and all creation know whom he delights in. The text of verse 23 reads, literally, "*This one* at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; *this one* shall be called Woman, because from man was taken out *this one*." Three times Adam clarified whom he celebrated: *This one!*⁶⁰ In effect, Adam said, "Hear ye, Hear ye, I declare unto y'all that this one, Eve, and Eve alone, is who I am excited about. Her and nothing else. Make no mistake, dear animals, I am not excited about you; I am excited about Eve only. She is mine; I am hers. What a babe she is; Whoa-man!" Can you tell he's happy?

In the same way, those who have not the gift of singleness feel incomplete in this life until they marry. Our spouse provides us a deep oneness for which there is no genuine substitute. Think back to the days when you were single, did you feel somewhat empty, incomplete, unsupported? Marriage is a help for that.

At the same time, our radical oneness with each other involves opposition. Women, generally speaking, need security, protection, someone to look out for them, someone to defend and shield them from creation itself. Men, generally speaking, need someone to support them in their work, someone to "hold down the fort" at home, someone to appreciate their vocation. In short, wives thrive with a husband they can depend upon; husbands thrive with a wife who depends upon them.

⁶⁰ I received this insight from Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*. NY: Norton, 2004; p. 22.

Something to note here: our spouses provide both oneness and opposition, but marriages which lose this balance soon disharmonize. If your marriage is only about oneness, and never opposition, then likely both spouses worship a counterfeit peace.

Oneness and opposition in parenting

Regarding parenting, one parent usually emerges as the disciplinarian, whether compelled or by choice. In such a home, the oneness is obvious: the husband and wife complete each other, filling up where the other lacks. But the oneness leads to opposition, or should, if the disciplinarian is too harsh, or if the easy-going parent neglects discipline.

Oneness and opposition in family “foreign policy”

Since, generally speaking, the husband focuses his attention primarily outside the home, for the sake of the home, and since the wife focuses primarily inside the home for the same sake, oneness and opposition inherently prevail. The benefits of oneness are immense. The wife ensures the home is in order and the relationships inside it peaceable; the husband ensures the home is protected and the relationships between it and the outside world peaceable. The oneness provides balance, and is to be enjoyed, but inevitably produces opposition. C.S. Lewis explains,

The relations of the family to the outer world—what might be called its foreign policy—must depend, in the last resort, upon the man, because he always ought to be, and usually is, much more just to the outsiders. A woman is primarily fighting for her own children and husband against the rest of the world. Naturally, almost, in a sense, rightly, their claims override, for her, all other claims. She is the special trustee of their interests. The function of the husband is to see that this natural preference of hers is not given its head. He has the last word in order to protect other people from the intense family patriotism of the wife. If anyone doubts this, let me ask a simple question. If your dog has bitten the child next door, which would you sooner have to deal with, the master of that house or the mistress? Or, if you are a married woman, let me ask you this question. Much as you admire your husband, would you not say that his chief failing is his tendency not to stick up for his rights and yours against the neighbours as vigorously as you would like? A bit of an Appeaser?⁶¹

Extending Lewis' illustration, a society where married men lived unopposed would eventuate into neglected family life, unstructured daily life, and uninhibited workaholicism where work is worshiped. On the other hand, a society where married women lived unopposed would, likely, become unproductive or barely productive, overly structured in the home,

⁶¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. NY: HarperCollins, 2001; p. 114.

and so centered on family life as to worship the family. Husbands and wives balance each other out.

Oneness and opposition in respective callings

Imagine a husband who provides food, shelter, and clothing for his family, but neglects to spend time with them. He is a workaholic who leaves for work prior to anyone's waking, and arrives home after supper. Upon arriving home, he eats supper by himself, crashes on the couch, and spends the rest of the evening watching television, reading the paper, or zonked out from a long day. Such is Monday; repeat five more times.

The oneness which the husband provides is food, shelter, and clothing, none of which should be denigrated. He correlates to his wife this way. But the husband is out of balance. He needs to be opposed for his good and the good of the family. This is where his wife comes in. She must remind her husband, and probably has, that work should support, not replace, their home. And if he is wise, he will listen carefully.

Conversely, lazy husbands need a wife to prod them for their good, and lazy wives need the same from their husbands. Overly ambitious husbands need to be opposed by their wives lest they burnout the entire family; overly ambitious wives need the same from their husbands.

Let me give you an example of this. The amount of time I work is a recurrent conversation between me and Rachelle. What she sees in my work is that which drags me away from her and our children; what I see in my work is that which provides for my wife and children. Her focus on the internal workings of our family opposes my tendency to overwork, and my focus upon our family's relationship with the outside world opposes her tendency to devalue my work.

Now some concluding remarks. Each couple should evaluate whether they are overly one or overly opposed. If the marriage is a place where little is accomplished, laziness persists, and two people co-exist in perpetual avoidance of issues needing address—call this counterfeit peace—the marriage correlation is out of balance. Oneness has entirely usurped opposition, and each spouse should repent of neglecting the hard work of sharpening the other spouse for their Christian growth. Conversely, if the marriage is filled with opposition, nit-picking, bickering, and endless frustration, the marriage correlation is skewed the other way. Opposition has taken over, and each spouse should repent of neglecting the hard work of encouraging and supporting the other in their respective callings. Where does your marriage tend: Lethargic oneness, cow-towing, avoidance, evasion, or aggressive opposition and perpetual battling?

It is still the case that financial disagreements are the number one cause of divorce, but please stop and think how, instead of making finances a point of contention, you can make them a point of mutual benefit. Research has proven married couples who stay married accrue more wealth than both

those who divorce and those who never married. Have you considered why this is? One researcher suggests the reason is at least one of the two spouses is frugal, demanding the less frugal spouse learn to live within his/her means by not overspending. This has a sharpening effect which promotes financial well-being, an effect from which the unwed are unable to benefit.

Marriage is a wealth-generating institution. Married couples create more economic assets on average than do otherwise similar singles or cohabiting couples. A 1992 study of retirement data concluded that “individuals who are not continuously married have significantly lower wealth than those who remain married throughout their lives.” Compared to those continuously married, those who never married have a reduction in wealth of 75 percent and those who divorced and didn’t remarry have a reduction of 73 percent...The institution of marriage itself provides a wealth-generation bonus. It does this through providing economies of scale (two can live more cheaply than one), *and as implicitly a long-term personal contract it encourages economic specialization. Working as a couple, individuals can develop those skills in which they excel, leaving others to their partner.*⁶²

This is only one application of the concept of oneness and opposition, but it is a powerful one. If you are a spendthrift, prone to consumerism, your spouse can be for you an accountability partner, or, better yet, the financial manager of your household. Marital teamwork in the area of finances has, statistically, a very great long-term benefit for spouses.

Strength for the chastening

Christian marriages which introspect to the neglect of the gospel will inevitably deteriorate. It is important that we lift our gaze to Jesus, who, in order to be married to us, walked through the fiercest opposition. In order to have us, to fulfill us, to complete us, to benefit us, He took upon Himself our worst (every sin), and underwent the relentless waves of God’s wrath against it. Jesus’ own Father, in all of His infinite wrath and justice, opposed Him, and unleashed not a mere chastisement, but hell itself, driving the curse against our sin down to His very soul. Jesus took the ultimate opposition to redeem us, and now, because He loves us, opposes us for our good.

How does Jesus oppose us for our good? One way is through our spouse. Jesus always uses the Christian community, and especially Christian spouses, to sanctify us, so, if we are to grow at all, instead of seeing the opposition of our spouse as the work of Satan, we should start to view it as the work of God our Savior. To be sure, our spouse will never

⁶² *The State of Our Unions: Marriage in America 2009*; pp. 87-88. Copyright 2009 by the National Marriage Project and the Institute for American Values: www.virginia.edu/marriageproject/pdfs/Union_11_25_09.pdf (italics, mine).

have pure motives, but this should not excuse us from seeing behind their every word and action the Almighty hand of Jesus Christ bringing into our ears and lives the very things we need to experience in order to grow up in Him. Just as the only way our relationship with Jesus Christ has any redeeming value is through His opposing our sin, for our good, so the only way our marriages can have any redeeming value is through the loving opposition of a spouse. If you desire true oneness with your spouse, true communion, genuine completion, then you will have to oppose, and be opposed by, them. They are sinful, and so are you. There has to be a measure of opposition.

Beautification: washing one another

In a non-committed relationship with a member of the opposite sex, when you see imperfections in the other person, you automatically begin searching for a better alternative. Thus, all dirt inside a non-committed relationship drives a wedge into the relationship. Insert enough dirt, the relationship collapses. This also means partners in the relationship become scared of dirt, fearful of sin, and always wondering when the final load of dirt will snap the camel's back. But if you are in a committed marriage, dirt does not drive a wedge, but drives to action. The moment you see dirt, you pray, ponder, and go to work with great care to remove the dirt from the other person, meanwhile loving them in the process. No amount of dirt scares you, for in a committed relationship, you love each other not for the beautiful saints you are, but for the beautiful saints you are becoming. Christian spouses love each other as Christ loves them:

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, *that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word.*

Ephesians 5:26

If you love someone you want to see them sanctified. Just as Jesus comes into our lives not merely to save us, but also to transform us, so spouses enter marriage not merely to strengthen each other, but to cleanse each other of sin. This, by the way, has radical implications for dating. If you are looking for a spouse who has it all together, who, as far as you can tell, is flawless, you are destined for an unhappy marriage. Not only will your spouse not be flawless, but if you enter marriage so naïve as to think you're marrying a sinless saint, you enter unprepared to handle their sins. I cannot tell you enough that whoever you marry is a very sinful person who does not have things together, and, in this life, never will. God has commissioned you, as their spouse, to *begin* the process of making them beautiful, and as Rome was not built in a day, so your spouse will not become beautiful overnight. Cultivating their beauty will take a lifetime of God's grace to them, through you, as you minister to them His Word.

Saint Paul writes that Jesus cleanses us through the washing of water with the word. A couple important elements of this should be kept in mind for our benefit. First, the Word is “living and active, sharper than any two edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Hebrews 4:12). The Word, then, is piercing, and painfully so. It cuts into the very depths of our being. Second, Paul says this is what Jesus uses to wash us in intimate places. Can you say, “Ouch!”? Here, then, is the idea: Christian spouses use biblical truth to wash each other of sin, including our most intimate parts, the very insides of our being (joints and marrow). Beautification, then, involves a lot of pain, and must be handled with care.

What is the worst part about going to the dentist? Having your teeth cleaned with a hardened steel tool beyond the gum line! Hygienists abrade plaque off parts of your teeth you never knew existed, and in the process rub sharp tools against some of the most sensitive tissue on your whole body: your gums. We can be thankful they're well-trained, but even so, a trip to the dentist is almost always painful. Now imagine how painful it would be to have your teeth cleaned by a clumsy 3 year old using the same sharp tools. A horrible thought, isn't it. Or notice, for example, the response of a child when a parent tries to scrub dried spaghetti sauce off their upper lip with an icy cold rag. The child thinks you, the parent, are trying to kill them, or so they act when you do it. What is going on? This: an abrasive object is coming into contact with *sensitive body parts*. A dental tool poking a finger or an icy cold wash-cloth scrubbing a hand, hurt not, but use them on sensitive areas and it hurts tremendously. Marriage is similar. In marriage, spouses apply not just the Word in general, but the Word specifically, to sensitive parts. Rebukes hurt, for they have pinpoint accuracy in areas formerly untouched. Thus, we must exercise great care in applying the Word to one another. If you don't wash gently, your spouse will quickly pull back and ensure you don't come close until you have improved your skills of handling their sensitive parts. And you *have* to improve, for you have an obligation to your spouse to be an instrument of their beautification.

Consider how this view of marriage flies in the face of modern trends. “Marriage”, say Americans, “Is for making people happy.” And though few voice this premise, marital actions speak it loud and clear. Here's how it works: “God wants me to be happy in marriage; I am very unhappy in my current marriage and the future looks bleak; therefore, God would be most pleased with me if I get divorced and marry a spouse who will make me happy.” The logic is valid, but the initial premise is problematic. God has not designed marriage to make us happy, but to make us holy, so, by extension of this principle, we will not be happy in marriage until we are on our way to becoming holy. This is most certainly not a popular thing to say nowadays, but must be said anyway. Anyone who enters marriage looking

for easy bliss and effortless happiness will flee from it in disgust. Such an outlook is non-Christian, and finds no place in Christian marriages. God has given spouses work to do, and do it we must, lest we be found wasting not only our lives, but the lives of our spouse. Spouses who marry for happiness aim too low, and would be helped in their view of marriage by considering words penned by C.S. Lewis in his famous sermon, “The Weight of Glory”:

If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at sea. We are far too easily pleased.⁶³

Christian spouses are commissioned by God to beautify one another for the purpose of storing up treasure in heaven. A spouse who truly loves the other will ensure they spend their time not flitting about making mud-pies (self-serving, temporal, fading pleasures) but preparing each other for a holiday at the Sea of Crystal. Spouses who spend marriage accumulating treasure in heaven rather than pleasure on earth, ironically, enjoy married life on earth far more than spouses who flit about chasing earthly pleasure.

This may frighten some of us, but hopefully encourage all: Your Christian spouse is a holy artifact, a vessel set apart by God for special use. Though the clay obscures it, underneath the shiny veneer of their clay pot hides a glory, which, if we saw it, would change the way we looked at each other permanently, and a glory which we will someday see:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours. This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously—no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption.⁶⁴

⁶³ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*. NY: HarperCollins, 2001; p. 26.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*; p. 46.

Your spouse will one day be so beautiful, that if you saw them now for what they will be, you would be strongly tempted to worship them. The work to which spouses are called is to begin the long, arduous process of shaping them into the glorious person they will become. This arduousness is the merriment for which there is no substitute, and on account of which C.S. Lewis says there can be no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption. Marriage is the hard work of crafting our spouse into the image of Christ, and, not until the sweat of prayer, rebuke, and genuine care oozes from our pores, we will say, satisfied, there is no greater joy than this work, and that we wish we would not have waited so long to get about it.

What does this look like?

Christian brothers, it is square on our shoulders to establish marriages which take the work of beautification seriously. And as we go about the work, we should note the intimate connection between Ephesians 5:25 and 5:26: Christ *died* in order to sanctify us, meaning, no death, no sanctification. Therefore, if our wives are not growing in Christ, we must first ask ourselves in what way we are failing to die for our wives. If we live self-centeredly, we cannot expect our wives to mature spiritually.

The man tends to set the spiritual tone of the family. Wives who are spiritually mature (and personally undamaged) despite the godlessness of their husbands are rare. Though there are noteworthy exceptions, it is unusual for a woman to display godliness when she is married to a man disinterested in God.⁶⁵

Husbands, the more we die to ourselves, the more our Christian wives tend to grow in grace. If you don't believe it, then test it by the opposite: our wives are most ugly, spiritually speaking, when we are most selfish and unloving toward them. In order to sanctify us, Christ did not sit in heaven, point out all our sins, and then command us to grow up and become more holy. He did not call us into heaven's living room, sit us down next to Him, and proceed to chew us out with the hope that, through His chewing, we would become holier. He left His throne, entered the putrid muck of our sinful mess, and walked all the way up to Calvary's hill on which He was damned in every sense of the word, so we could be loved. Do we actively love our wives in order to make them more beautiful? Here are some things to think about (#4 has application to both husbands and wives):

1. If your wife is scared to use her gifts around you, you can:
 - a. Tell her to get busy using her gifts; or
 - b. Ask her what you do to discourage her from using her gifts. Maybe you demean her when she uses them; maybe you tear her apart when she

⁶⁵ Bryan Chappell, *Each for the Other*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006; p. 77.

- pours her time into something and it turns out badly; maybe you are so perfectionistic she fears not doing a good enough job to satisfy you.
2. If your wife is unable to draw near you sexually, you can:
 - a. Tell her to submit to your request for sex (this will really endear her to you...); or
 - b. Ask her why she is unable to draw near you sexually (then listen to her without comment).
 3. If your wife is consumed with her external beauty, you can:
 - a. Tell her to stop it; or
 - b. Ask her the ways you make her feel unattractive or unwanted. Oftentimes a Christians wife's obsession with external beauty is driven not so much by modern trends (although this is frequently the case), but by a husband who criticizes her beauty or points out her physical flaws (as if she didn't know she was gaining weight or accruing wrinkles).
 4. If your spouse is jealous of others, or feels second-rate behind any other person or thing, you can:
 - a. Tell him/her they are second only to Jesus Christ (you should probably tell them this); and
 - b. Get about the hard work of their spiritual beautification. Your spouse will not grow close to you if you are not cleansing them. Jesus has set us apart to gaze at us and carefully mold us into His image. How do we know? Because He is cleansing us! Jesus notices our every spot and wrinkle, which suggests He loves us a lot because He takes the time to gaze upon us. Therefore, if you are not gazing upon your spouse, spending time cleansing them with care and love, they will assume you have set someone or something else apart in place of them, and will become jealous.

Jesus motivated by our pitiable condition

Immature love sees no flaws and loves; mature loves sees all the flaws and still loves. What makes a good marriage great is not ignoring the flaws of our spouse, but staring them straight in the face, dealing with them, and loving our spouse in the midst of their flaws and sins. This sounds counterintuitive, and it is, until our instincts are fashioned after Christ's mature love for us: our sin drove Jesus to action; it was our pitiable state in sin and under the Father's wrath which compelled Jesus to sacrifice His life for our us! John Flavel, a 17th century English pastor, explained the interchange between God the Father and God the Son this way:

The Father speaks. "My Son, here is a company of poor, miserable souls that have utterly undone themselves and now lay open to my justice. Justice demands satisfaction for them, or will satisfy itself in the eternal ruin of them." The Son responds. "Oh my Father. Such is my love to and pity for them, that rather than they shall perish eternally I will be responsible for them as their guarantee. Bring in all thy bills, that I may see

what they owe thee. Bring them all in, that there be no after-reckonings with them. At my hands shall thou require it. I would rather choose to suffer the wrath that is theirs then they should suffer it. Upon me, my Father, upon me be all their debt." The Father responds. "But my Son, if thou undertake for them, thou must reckon to pay the last mite. Expect no abatement. Son, if I spare them... I will not spare you." The Son responds. "Content Father. Let it be so. Charge it all upon me. I am able to discharge it. And though it prove a kind of undoing to me, though it impoverish all my riches, empty all my treasures... I am content to take it."

Meditate on this, for when this truth is driven deep into your heart, your spouse's pitiable, sinful condition will not drive you away from them, but draw you toward them, in sacrificial love, and you will find yourself asking, "What can I do to help you deal with this sin in your life? I love you so much I hate seeing sin devastate your life. What can I do to help? Put me to work."

Presentation: preparing one another

Just as Christ is working "to present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:27), so spouses, husbands in particular, are to ready each other for their grand entrance upon the stage of eternity. And as the goal of military training is not being in shape but being ready for war, and as the goal of Olympic training is not being the best in the world, but being the best in the world at the Olympics, so the goal of marital growth is not the enjoyment of a happy marriage, but the great day in the future when we shall have the privilege of knowing, as it were, that, strictly by His grace, God used us to foster within our spouse the holiness without which they will not see the Lord. In other words, Christian spouses are vehicles of redemption for each other.

Each Christian spouse is not only destined for glory, but also desperately longing to be and feel glorious. The appetite for glory established in a Christian is no false sensation, but the very urge which spouses are called to direct toward the proper substance: Jesus' Second Coming. The glory we feel we cannot live without is no joke, but a reality implanted in the Christian soul which leaves us longing for that something else which has not yet arrived, but which we know is coming, and must be coming soon. C.S. Lewis explains:

Our lifelong nostalgia, our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside, is no mere neurotic fancy, but the truest index of our real situation. And to be at last summoned inside would be both glory and honour beyond all our merits and also the healing of that old ache...At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door...But all the leaves of the New testament are rustling

with the rumour that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get *in*.⁶⁶

Jesus presented Himself in our place

You have the distinct privilege, believer, to be presented before Jesus Christ in splendor and radiance, and to be involved in the presentation of your spouse before Him, but lest you burn out, or lose hope, or make light of the privilege, you must know not merely *that* Jesus will present you in splendor, but *what it cost* Him to present you in splendor. It cost Him all His splendor. Jesus Christ, prior to His incarnation, was a being so beautiful and glorious that, if You saw Him, you would worship Him. He left behind his heavenly beauty, took upon Himself our human flesh, and underwent the most effective means devised to strip a man of every vestige of splendor. He became the ugliness of our sin, and while hanging upon the Cross, the skin of His back torn from flogging and the disgrace of His nakedness evident for all to see, He was so ugly men hid their faces out of shame: “As one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (Isaiah 53:2-3). But it gets worse. No vocabulary can fitly describe how ugly Jesus appeared, on the Cross, cursed with our sin, to *His Father*. Having forever been the infinitely beautiful object of His Father’s affection, Jesus became, at that moment, the ugliest being who ever lived, and His Father treated Him as such. Jesus presented Himself to His Father in the horrendous ugliness of our sin, and what a sore sight He was, and then, as if it could not get any worse, the Father unleashed upon Jesus every soul-destroying ounce of His wrath against that ugliness. What must it have been like to leave infinite splendor for inexpressible repulsiveness? We will never know; praise God Almighty we will never know. But Jesus knows, and now He tells you something you must know: He did this all for you, and the hell of it was so terrifying that He is doing, and will do, everything—absolutely everything—in His power to rid your life of the ugliness of sin. He underwent the hell and punishment of infinite ugliness to make you infinitely beautiful. Oh, that we would not resist the beautifying work of He who can testify with holes in His hands and side to the agony of unsightliness before the Father. May we never cast aside the work of Christ as if He were trying to destroy us, for He is delivering us from destruction, even if it feels like He is doing the very opposite.

⁶⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*. NY: HarperCollins, 2001; pp. 41-43.

The Priority of Marriage

An Exclusive Relationship

When you marry, you break radically with your past, and, by so doing, accomplish two things: exclusion and inclusion. Exclusion happens through redefined friendships: less dependence upon mom and dad, and a complete break from the dating scene. Inclusion takes place by pouring your life into your spouse. Marriage is making your spouse your number one priority, second only to Jesus, and by so doing, making all others less a priority. Conversely, by making all other humans beings less a priority than your spouse, you make your spouse a priority. When this happens, you create what C.S. Lewis calls the inner ring:

I believe that in all men's lives at certain periods, and in many men's lives at all periods between infancy and extreme old age, one of the most dominant elements is the desire to be inside the local Ring and the terror of being left outside.⁶⁷

When Adam and Eve sinned, they were removed from the Garden of Eden, but they were also removed from the inner ring of the life of the Trinity. And when this happened, it created an insatiable vacuum deep within the human soul, a vacuum so large, so deep, so painful, that few humans need to be convinced it exists. We know it does, and feel its effects daily. We desperately want back inside the ring, and, if left outside, are terrified. In a world of broken relationships, we all want to be inside the inner ring, inside the group of people who *really* know.

Movie makers do this frequently. They do it by creating an inner ring, an assortment of characters who *really* know, and, once the ring is created, you're given a glimpse into it, but only a glimpse, and one which leaves you longing to get inside, and hating being left outside. You're in angst, a bit of turmoil, in "suspense", as they like to call it. Why? What creates the suspense? What creates it is being left outside the inner circle. You want in, but they don't allow you in. Other movies draw you in by creating an inner ring *of which you are a member*. You, the viewer, are the only one in the know, and as an outsider you become the insider, the only insider, until one character after another discovers the truth—the *real* story—at which time you include them in your inner ring and root for them. Unannounced to you, you and the characters who *really* know are a ring of your own.

Why is this important to notice? For this reason: if you nurture your Christian marriage, you create a sort of inner ring, a relationship where you and your spouse are *really* in the know and everyone else is left outside. And then this, your marriage, becomes a great source of strength, for no matter how many inner rings you are left outside of (rings of friends, of family, of

⁶⁷ Ibid; pp. 146-148.

co-workers), you know there is one ring inside of which you live. You can relax; you're in; the angst is gone.

Though the illustration breaks down at a certain point, it is nonetheless helpful because it displays a fundamental truth: unless your marriage is an inner ring where both spouses feel safe from expulsion and exploitation, each spouse will desperately seek inclusion in another ring (children, friends, members of the opposite sex), and the marriage will slowly disintegrate. How do we create the inner ring? By noticing three truths:

1. Marriage takes priority over self-centeredness
2. Marriage takes priority over parent-centeredness
3. The One who made us His priority

Marriage takes priority over self-centeredness

Notice a husband is called to give as much attention to the well-being of his wife as he does his own body.

In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but *nourishes* and *cherishes* it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body.

Ephesians 5:28-30

Capturing profound theological truths in sound bites is always dangerous, but if we could, we might use the phrase, “Happy wife; happy life” to describe the truth taught in these verses. Husbands are to treat their wives as they treat themselves, so that a husband who mistreats his wife mistreats himself, and a husband who loves his wife loves himself. And Paul uses two words in particular to describe how a husband cares for his own body, and thus how he should care for his wife: “nourishes” and “cherishes.” Let’s work with these words.

To nourish means to provide the basic necessities needed for daily life: food, shelter, and clothing. This means that one of the primary duties of a husband toward his wife is working to sustain her life. Once married, the primary concern of a husband is not career success, but feeding our wives, putting a roof over their heads, and putting clothing on their backs. To feel the weight of this is good and godly.

I have talked with numerous husbands who worry about providing for their families. Some want to know if such a burden is appropriate, and if the burden will ever go away. I usually tell them this burden is from God, and hopefully, will never go away. As Christ nourishes the church, feeding her, giving her the basic necessities of life in Him, so the husband does the same for his wife as long as they both live. One of the greatest indicators of readiness for marriage is a man who feels the burden of providing for a

future spouse; if a man lacks this burden, it would suggest he is ill-equipped for the rigors of married life.

The second word Paul uses to describe the priorities of a husband to his wife is “cherish.” Paul uses the same word to describe his ministry among the Thessalonian Christians,

We were gentle among you, like a nursing mother *taking care* of her own children.

1 Thessalonians 2:7

Have you ever watched a nursing mother with a child at her breast, how she cuddles the child, sacrifices for the child, and goes to infinite lengths to care for that child, up to, and including, severe sleep deprivation and near total exhaustion? She would literally, and figuratively does, lay down her life for the child. Such ought to be the manner of a husband’s love for his wife: exerting at least the same amount of effort to care for his wife which he exerts to care for himself. Scary, isn’t it, and, in a way, sad, that Paul has to use a self-love illustration to teach husbands how to love their wives. Why does he do this? Because he knows how self-centered men are. He is saying, in essence, “Look, I know you husbands are so self-absorbed, so self-concerned, so self-centered that you will never fail to care for yourself and look out for #1. So, now that you are married, let me give you a perspective on your wife...if you love yourself, and I know you do, then you had better love your wife! Don’t believe me? Just try not loving her and tell me what happens! If you want your life to go well, and I know you do, then you must love your wife.”

Consider three implications. First, it is important to note spouses cannot escape each other. When you marry, the condition of your spouse affects you. If you hurt your spouse, you commit suicide; if you treat them well, you feel well treated. God has so designed marriage that when a spouse is weakened, the marriage is weakened, and when one spouse is injured, so is the other. Use words to tear down your spouse, and you’ll be torn down; neglect to care for your spouse, and you’ll be sick yourself. This much is certain: once married, you cannot escape the influence of your spouse.

When I lived in Denver, CO, many of my co-workers sought, nearly nightly, reprieve from bad marriages in the bottom of 12 cans of beer, a listening ear (usually mine), and late nights (if you arrive home after the wife’s in bed, and leave before she wakes, you can escape her, or so they reasoned). It was not until years later, after I became a Christian, married, and reflected back on their marriages, that I realized not a single one successfully escaped his wife. In fact, each of these men was more under the control of his wife than the man who went straight home after work to an angry, controlling wife. Here is why: if you asked any of them why they worked late, and why they drowned away innumerable nights in the bar, and why they arrived home late and went to work early, they all said something to the effect of, “Because of my wife.” Meaning, whether they

were at home, or work, or at the bar, they could not escape their marriages! The very fact that *their wife* was the reason they were at the bar, and the fact their nearly every other sentence contained their wife's name conjoined with bitter complaints and four letter words, proves the impossibility of escaping a spouse unaffected. Even the most radical form of running away—divorce—leaves you drastically affected. Once you marry, no matter how hard you try, there is no area of your life which will go unaffected. So if you're fleeing your marriage, you should have the integrity to admit that by fleeing it, you are more a slave to it than the man who, instead of fleeing, is temporarily consumed by working through disagreements with his wife: at least he's not enslaved to an exorbitant bar tab, and the notoriously greasy food!

Second, since our outlook on all of life is affected by the condition of our bodies, so that when our bodies fall apart it affects our work, recreations, and our whole perspective on life, so too our entire life is affected by the health of our marriage. We are only as strong as our marriage is strong.

For example, if your entire life is a ruinous mess, your career path broken, your friendships strained, and your health ill, but your marriage strong, you feel strong. However, if your career path is strong, your friendships excellent, and your health tip-top, yet your marriage weak, you are weak. Marriage is a powerful relationship which makes or breaks your entire life. When it is in good repair, so are you; when it is broken, so are you.

Third, husbands, the pattern toward which we must strive is caring for our wives as Christ cares for us. Is Jesus nasty to you? Does He neglect you? Does He treat you harshly? Not at all. In fact, Christ loves us with a love beyond that of a mother for her nursing infant. A nursing mother will more quickly neglect to care for the child nursing at her breast than Jesus will neglect to care for you. He will never forget to care for you, and, while hanging on the Cross, with His hands pierced by the spikes, He has given you infallible proof, "I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands" (Isaiah 49:15).

Marriage takes priority over parent-centeredness

The key word of this section is "leave"

Therefore a man shall *leave* his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.

Ephesians 5:31; quoted from Genesis 2:24

The word translated "leave" may better be translated "forsake" or "abandon", because the word denotes separation so radical that life after leaving one's

parents will never, and should never, be the same.⁶⁸ To leave our parents is to turn our backs on them and move toward our spouse:

The language of “leave” and “cleave” appears intended to stress the necessity of a radical change, not of domicile [residence], but of one’s preeminent loyalty—a husband is to transfer to his wife the primary familial loyalty which he once owed to his parents.⁶⁹

Paul could not have used more powerful language to convey the radical break husbands and wives must make with their parents. The Bible is filled with commands for children to honor parents, yet in speaking of marriage, Paul says loyalty to spouse must supersede loyalty to parents. Dr. Lloyd-Jones explains:

When a man gets married he enters into a new unity that breaks former relationships. He is no longer to be bound and held by the former relationships because he is entering into a new and into a more intimate relationship of unity. Until he got married the man’s chief loyalty was to his father and mother; but that is no longer the case; he has now to “leave his father and mother” and enter into this new relationship. That is a staggering statement, especially in view of the fact that there is so much teaching in the Scripture about the relationship of parents and children...In practice it means that this man has to regard himself henceforth, not primarily as a child of his parents, but as the husband of his wife...he has to make a great mental adjustment; he has to think matters through, to assume new responsibilities, and to begin to live in a new way...The leaving of the father and the mother in reality means this, that *he must not allow his father and mother to control him as they have always done hitherto.*⁷⁰

In the last sentence, Lloyd-Jones mentions a truth worth exploring: how a married couple must not allow parents to control their marriage. It’s a vital truth, and one which we’ll unfold by exposing three common hindrances to leaving parents. Spouses have a hard time leaving their parents if (1) They mimic their parents (love them too much); (2) They react against their parents (hate them); or (3) Their parents are over-bearing (refuse to let go).

Mimicking parents

If either spouse lives in marriage strictly the way one of his or her parents lived in marriage, the spouse has not left mom and dad, and the marriage

⁶⁸ The same word is used to describe Moses’ during the Exodus from Egypt: “By faith, Moses *left* [abandoned, forsook] Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king” (Hebrew 11:27).

⁶⁹ Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994; pp. 159-160.

⁷⁰ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Life in the Spirit: In Marriage, Home & Work* (Baker, 2003); pp. 224-225 (italics, mine).

will suffer radically. Marriage establishes a brand new home with a brand new set of rules. For example, Rachelle and I knew a couple who ate out for supper three nights per week to give the mother enough time to home school eight children. In the culture from which both marrieds originated, families who ate out on a regular basis were considered lazy and irresponsible. They took much flack from friends and family for eating out, but they did it anyway because they understood a very important principle for marriage: *you may order your home as you like*.

With your marriage you are founding a home. That needs a rule of life, and this rule of life is so important that God establishes it himself, because without it everything would get out of joint. *You may order your home as you like, except in one thing: the wife is to be subject to her husband and the husband is to love his wife.*⁷¹

When two people marry, they bring to the marriage two entirely different sets of gifts and talents than their parents. The call is to use those appropriately, not in imitation of the way our parents used them, but as it best benefits our spouse.

What are some ways we might mindlessly imitate our parents to the detriment of our marriages? Here are a few for consideration:

1. My mom did all the cooking; therefore my wife must do it all;
2. My mother did all the laundry; therefore my wife must do it all;⁷²
3. My dad managed the finances; therefore I must manage the finances.
4. My parents camped on vacation; therefore we must camp while on vacation;
5. My parents had “this many” children; therefore we must have close to the same number.

Not long after Rachelle and I married, we encountered two situations which showed neither of us had left our parents (many more situations followed!). The first incident occurred one sunny, Summer afternoon when, to my shock, as I neared our driveway on my way home from work, there, under the scorching heat of Summer’s sun, laboriously pushing our lawn

⁷¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison: The Enlarged Edition*. NY: Touchstone, 1997; p. 43 (italics, mine).

⁷² When I was about 12 years old, I tried to help my mother by washing a load of laundry (it was one of those rare occasions I was genuinely trying to be helpful). I had always thought bleach made clothing *extra* clean, so I threw a couple church dresses in the washing machine, along with various filthy clothes, and then proceeded to pour into the machine copious amounts of bleach, thinking, of course, the bleach would magically clean any stains the filthy clothes may leave on the church clothes. I was right; the bleach washed away the stains, and the color too. Not pretty. Needless to say, my mom and sisters were less than thrilled with the random white designs on their Sunday garb. Fortunately, my wife doesn’t mind doing the laundry; in fact, given my incompetence, she prefers to do it!

mower, was my wife. I nearly jumped out of the vehicle mid-street to wrest the mower from her grip, but managed to pull into the driveway first, then, emasculated, and not wanting to make a scene spoken about at the local coffee shops the next morning, I trudged into the house, slouched down on the couch, and waited for her to finish. You see, in my family growing up, the men mowed the lawn, and in Pella, the town I grew up in, no respectable man allowed his wife to mow the lawn in the scorching heat. I was so embarrassed that I asked her if anyone had driven by while she was mowing (we lived on a fairly well-travelled city street, so, of course, I was convinced all 10,000 city residents had driven by in the previous hour to see it), and I was convinced I'd be the city's object of silent mockery for days to come. When Rachelle came in, I told her my concerns about mowing the lawn, how I had a reputation to protect as her knight in shining armor, but she entirely dismantled my argument, and my pride, with one, very wise and well thought sentence: "Zechariah, I know you work hard all day, so when I have summer's off (she was a teacher), I want to mow the lawn so when you come home you don't have to do it, and we can spend more time together." What can you say to that? Shortly after I swallowed my pride, I agreed. Interestingly enough, once we arrived at this decision, I noticed other wives who, living within the city limits and married to respectable men, mowed the lawn.

The second incident occurred when Rachelle became frustrated with my negligence in the department of vehicle hygiene. She grew up with a brother and dad who frequently, and meticulously, cleaned their cars; I grew up in a home where we cleaned cars in desperate situations only. So when Rachelle and I married, she complained, usually indirectly using rather large hints, that the car was dirty on the inside, and covered with road salt on the outside (I didn't notice any). My biggest complaint was she felt the car needed to be vacuumed and washed every week: for her, weekly was standard; for me, weekly was obsessive compulsive. Every time I failed to wash the car according to her standards, she felt neglected. And every time she told me the car needed to be washed, I felt stupid and incompetent. We had to talk about it and figure out what *our* car-cleanliness policy would be. Incidentally, our cars are clean enough to ride in, though I wouldn't recommend eating off the carpet, and now that we live in Springfield, MO where roads are seldom, if ever, salted, our cars seldom, if ever, see the inside of a car wash.

In reality, these incidents are petty, but at the moment they are very significant, and leave us feeling horrible. What is going on? What is happening is this: If, in marriage, we say, or live in such a way as to say, "That is not the way my parents did it", what we are really saying, or at least what our spouse hears, is, "I regret marrying you. I wish I still lived at home. I wish you were my mom, or my dad." If our marriages are to grow, we must recognize each marriage since Adam and Eve's contains two very different

spouses with two different sets of strengths and weaknesses. Realizing this, it is imperative spouses not mimic the marriage of another, but, instead, decipher a wise division of labor which utilizes the strengths and preferences of each spouse in such a way that the whole marriage benefits.

Reacting against parents

Spouses have a hard time leaving their parents not only if they mimic them, but also if they react against them (hate them). If you spend your marriage living exactly the opposite of the way your parents lived in theirs, you have not left your parents: you are just as much enslaved to your parents, maybe even more so, than those who mimic their parents. For example, some spouses refuse to discipline their children because they were abused at the hands of an overbearing disciplinarian, and now, refusing to study what the Bible says about disciplining children, and with children utterly out of control, their marriage is falling apart. Some spouses refuse to work through disagreements because their parents argued constantly and heatedly, and now, unwilling to learn how to handle a spouse's sin, and with years of accumulated bitterness and disagreements left untouched, their marriage falls apart. Some spouses refuse to give themselves sexually to the other because the misuse of sex destroyed their parents' marriage, and now, convinced sex is inherently dirty and sinful, their marriage is falling apart. What is happening in each of these instances? What is happening is this: we are punishing our spouse for the sins of our parents.

Or, for example, some spouses who were abused or neglected as children try to ensure this will never happen in their home by idolizing their children, and now, by neglecting their spouse, their marriage and children are falling apart. They have exchanged one form of child abuse for another. Putting children ahead of a spouse is a form of child abuse. Why? Because children need parents to be parents, not emotionally dependent adults. If we pour more time and attention into our children than into our spouse, both will fail. Our children will falter under the pressure to meet parental expectations, and the parent will be violently disappointed to find that the child is just a child. What a child needs from a parent is not a spouse, but a teacher, a trainer, an educator, a Christian life-guide.

Do you see what is going on? What is going on is we are letting our parents into the inner ring. We are forcing our spouse to marry our parents, to marry our children, and to marry others around us, but by so doing, the marital inner ring is destroyed. Marriage is exclusive; no one else may come in, and if they do, damage results. In all honesty, some of us need to go home today, call up our parents, and tell them we forgive them. Or if that may be inappropriate, we need at least to forgive them from the heart (Matthew 18:35). We need to tell our spouse we are sorry we have not left our parents,

and ask our spouse's forgiveness. For some of us, this is the only way our marriage will ever grow.

Over-bearing parents

The third hindrance to spouses leaving parents is parents who refuse to let go. To whom is Genesis 2:24 first applied? To Adam and Eve *as future parents*. It's interesting, isn't it, that the first time God said, "A man shall leave his father and mother", Adam had no earthly father or mother to leave, so the application was not to Adam or Eve's parents, but to Adam and Eve as spouses soon to become parents. Put another way, the LORD was telling Adam and Eve right from the start, "When Cain and Seth leave you to marry their wives, *you must let them go.*"

In American weddings, the father customarily walks his daughter down the aisle to give her away, and, also customarily, the father cries, for he knows, or at least feels, that in a few minutes, he will no longer hold central place in his daughter's life. His place of prominence will be replaced by another man. When the father hands her off, he hands her to a man who, from that day forward, has more authority from God in her life than her dad. Some fathers may give away their daughters cheerfully, especially if the daughter incurred massive financial debt while in college—he's probably glad someone else will pay the tab. But fathers who truly understand the relationship with their daughter will never, and should never, be the same again, will feel like they are giving away a piece of themselves. The moment a father gives his daughter away in marriage, he falls to second place, behind her husband. It will hurt him, but the pain of separation is necessary, and a father who brings his daughter to the altar without experiencing the pain of losing her, convinced her allegiance toward him will undergo no change, plants seeds of destruction in his daughter's marriage. Fathers, if you love your daughters, *let them go* if they marry, for this is God's design.

Fathers and mothers, if you *really* love your son or daughter, you will let them leave you behind. If you *really* love them you will relinquish being the center of their lives so their spouse can take center stage. God has given parents the task of raising children so that one day, the children will leave the parents behind. The calling of parents is to instruct, train, and raise their children so that they are prepared to leave the home and function in society on their own, independent of their parents (exception: mentally or physically handicapped children). And, at the risk of being offensive, it is worth noting two ditches we parents should avoid while traveling "Child-rearing Road." The first ditch is neglecting to train our children, and thus leaving them entirely unprepared for life in the world. The second ditch is training our children to depend upon us for the rest of their lives. In the first scenario, the parents don't want to be inconvenienced by their children; in the second scenario the parents want their children to worship them.

The first parents are lazy and indifferent; the second parents are insecure and manipulative. Both are equally selfish.

The One who made us His priority

Marriage is the painful restructuring of former relationships for the sake of establishing a substantial relationship with a spouse. Jesus is no stranger to this.

When the time came for Jesus to get busy with His public ministry, He left certain things behind: “*Leaving* [forsaking] Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea” (Matthew 4:13). When Jesus left Nazareth, he left the comfort of His home, the shelter of His parents, the work in the carpenter shop, and everything else familiar—it was a leaving behind of those things dear to Him in order to pursue things dearer, more important, more necessary. But as significant as this must have been, especially to his parents, Jesus left behind a relationship infinitely more dear to Him in order to marry us. In order to marry you, believer, Jesus left His Father in heaven, and was Himself left behind, on the Cross, by His own Father. Jesus knows not only the pain of leaving behind, but the pain of being left behind. On the cross Jesus cried out, “My God, My God, *why* have you left Me, why have you forsaken me, why have you abandoned me?” Do you know the answer, believer? Do you know why God forsook Jesus Christ? Do you know why the Father abandoned His beloved Son? For you! Jesus was forsaken so you could be brought in. The 2nd person of the Trinity was cast out of the Trinity, so to speak, that you might be brought into the life of the Trinity. At infinite cost to Himself, Jesus left His Father to join Himself to us in spiritual marriage. He knows the pain of abandonment, and the joy of establishing a relationship with you. So when you find it nearly impossible to leave the past and embrace an unknown future, remember Jesus left an infinitely glorious past to embrace a certain future: the future of suffering, crucifixion, and God-forsakenness. He did it for you, just to have you!

Objection #1

I love both my wife and mother, and reject the notion that I must make my wife more a priority than my mother. My wife nags about my spending too much time with my mother, and looking to my mother for things I should be looking to my wife to give me (advice, friendship). I don't think I should have to choose between my wife and my mother.

You may benefit from the true story of a newlywed husband who lived across the street from his mother, and who daily spent his lunch break with his mother, leaving his wife to eat at home by herself. He never learned to tell his mother, “No”, for fear of offending her, and so spent many hours

performing “mother-dos” to the neglects of his “honey-dos.” His wife, having pleaded with him for years to make her a priority, left him on the basis of abandonment. And his mother is in the grave. He now spends his time alone—utterly and painfully alone—regretting the attitude you exemplify, an attitude he formerly had. Husbands, if you make your mother, your sister, your daughter, or any other lady more a priority than your spouse, you’re killing your wife. And if you wonder whether or not you’re killing her, ask her. She’ll probably tell you, and you should probably listen to her. And if you’re not yet married, but plan to prioritize your future wife equally alongside your mother, I recommend saving both you, and your future wife, the heartache of marriage: don’t bother getting married until you are willing make your wife a greater priority than any other lady in your life, including your dear mother.

Objection #2

We love our son too much to let him go. We love him so much we don’t want to see him fail in marriage, and we are afraid that if we allow his wife to take a prominent place in his life, they will make many mistakes and ultimately fail in many ways.

If this is your attitude toward your son, and by extension toward his wife, you don’t really love your son, and you certainly don’t love his wife. You love yourselves, and your main concern is not them, but control over them, and you should repent of it. In fact, if you are jealous of his wife, and cannot loose your controlling fingers from your son’s life, you should wonder if you ever really loved your son, or if only ever loved the man you wanted him to be. It sounds as if you have been using your son to boost your self-esteem as a parent, which is self-love, not parental love at all. If you love your son, you will allow him to elevate his wife to the place of prominence you once held in his life, even, and especially, if that means he does not become what you always wanted him to become. Of one thing you can be sure: your son, and his new wife, *will* fail, and will make many of the same mistakes you made, and probably many more in addition. But through those failures, by God’s grace, they will grow closer to Christ and to each other.

If this sounds too radical, don’t take my word for it. Listen to Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a well-respected biblical expositor, address you:

[Parents] must not interfere in this new married life. They have always commanded their son [and daughter] in the past in various ways, and it was right that they should do so. They must not do so any longer; they must recognize that something entirely new has emerged, and that they must not think of their son [or daughter] any longer simply as their son [or daughter]. He is now married, a new unity has been created, and whatever they do to him they do to his wife at the same time. So obviously they cannot treat him as they treated him formerly... *The parents on both sides*

*have to realize that they are not what they were before. Everything is different.*⁷³

Question #1

Why is creating a sort of an inner ring of marriage important for our well-being as spouses?

A marriage where both spouses feel they are on the inside of the ring helps both spouses avoid severe temptations. If you have such an inner ring in marriage, you will seldom chase the inner ring of an elite club of friends or the inner ring of adultery with another, but if your spouse leaves you on the cold outside, on the wrong side of the door in the middle of winter, you will seek, and zealously so, another inner ring, another place to belong, a someone else, or a group of elses, who will take you into their warmth, and in so doing, will find yourself walking into all manner of sins which could have been avoided, humanly speaking, if your spouse let you inside.

When you marry, you enter an inner ring, into which others may look, but never participate, into which others may cast their glances, but of which they may never partake. Your marriage is a club of its own, a place where two adults are really “in the know.” A place where two adults enjoy an inner fellowship and communion of which no one else may enjoy. Create it; sustain it; enjoy it.

Question #2

My wife and I have created an inner ring in our marriage. Everyone else—parents, children, neighbors, co-workers, friends, etc—is left on the outside, as they should be. However, something is missing. Our inner ring is hollow, shallow, unsatisfying, and leaves us dissatisfied and empty. In fact, the tighter our inner ring becomes, the more dissatisfied we are with one another. Are we doing something wrong?

There is a large difference between creating an inner ring of marriage for the sake of worshiping Christ, and worshiping the inner ring of your marriage to the neglect of Christ. You may be doing the latter. If you feel like there is another ring, a ring yet unknown, a ring outside of which you now stand and into which you long to penetrate, knowing that until you penetrate it real joy will elude you, allow me to proclaim to you the unknown ring: Jesus Christ our Lord. The unknown inner ring for which you strive, the elusive circle to which your heart longs to belong, that set of relationships for which you starve, can only be found in the life of the Trinity. So if the two of you are Christians, then spend your time not worshiping each other, but

⁷³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Life In The Spirit: In Marriage, Home & Work*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003; p. 225 (italics, mine).

worshipping Christ together, and rejoicing He has included you in the only inner ring which genuinely satisfies. If the two of you are non-Christians, then you're not inside the only ring your heart longs for. You are condemned. Do you want that longing way down deep within your soul fulfilled? Enter into the true inner ring, for which your marriage cannot suitably substitute, and of which even the best marriage is but a trite, and very small picture.

Question #3

Both my wife and I come from very good Christian homes with excellent Christian parents who raised their children very well. Our upbringings were nearly perfect; our family lives were incredible. Yet our marriage is a disaster. Our marriage is not half as good as either of our parents' marriages, and neither of us are half as good at parenting as our parents. We fight constantly, and wish our home could be as good as the homes from which we came. Do you have any advice?

You might be surprised to learn the homes from which each of you came may not have been as excellent as you think. In fact, instead of being the spiritual havens you claim they were, they may have been spiritual wastelands. Here is what I mean. Good Christian homes are not those homes where family members have it all together, but are those homes where family members live in constant repentance and forgiveness, focusing their attention not on themselves (how good they get along and how much fun they have), but on Christ and how precious He is. It sounds like each of you came from homes which, while claiming to have Christ as the object of the family's worship and affection, were themselves the object of the family's worship and affection. You should know that homes which worship themselves produce children with some of the worst marriages, or children who avoid marriage entirely because no one of the opposite gender is ever good enough. I suggest the two of you repent, to God, for worshiping the homes out of which you came, and also repent, to God and each other, for worshiping your own home to the neglect of Christ. And, though you cannot change your upbringing, you can make every effort to establish Christ, not your family, as the center of your home, by taking every opportunity to repent, both in front of your children and to your children, of your sins. And whatever you do, never hold forth your family as the preeminent example of godliness, after which each of your children must precisely pattern their families; rather, hold forth Christ as your first love, making Him the object of your affection.

The Companionship of Marriage

An Affectionate Relationship

We see how great love the human nature is capable of, not only to God but fellow creatures. How greatly are we inclined to the other sex! Nor doth an exalted and fervent love to God hinder this, but only refines and purifies it—Jonathan Edwards⁷⁴

“The two shall become one flesh” (Ephesians 5:31) entails, most obviously, sexually intimacy, a subject dealt with in the next chapter. But in our overly sexualized culture, we often miss the additional meanings of the passage. What does it mean for two people to become one flesh? Gordon Hugenberger sheds this light,

Had it been the author’s intention to refer just to the act of sexual union, it is unclear why he employed such an unusual expression as “become one flesh,” rather than, for example, “...and he will know her.”...In other words, it is doubtful that the reader is to imagine that following the consummation of the marriage in sexual union or following each successive act of intercourse, the couple reverts to their former state of being two separate fleshes!...*It appears likely that “they become one flesh” refers to the familial bondedness of marriage which finds its quintessential expression in sexual union.*⁷⁵

Two becoming one flesh, though it means at least sexual intimacy, is a full-bodied expression meaning that when two people marry they become spiritually, emotionally, financially, physically, relationally, and psychologically interconnected. They become one person. Physical intimacy is merely the delightful expression of the oneness.

As is often the case, Scripture sheds light on Scripture, so though this chapter is based on Ephesians 5:31, “The two shall become one flesh”, we will spend the bulk of it examining Proverbs 2:17 and Malachi 2:14:

[An adulteress] forsakes *the companion of her youth* and forgets the covenant of her God.

Proverbs 2:17

Why does [the LORD not regard or accept our offerings]? Because the LORD was witness between you and *the wife of your youth*, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your *companion* and your wife by covenant.

Malachi 2:14

Notice with me three principles derived from the verses:

⁷⁴ George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003; p. 106.

⁷⁵ Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994; pp. 161,163 (italics, mine).

1. Marital companionship is partnership
2. Marital companionship is camaraderie
3. Marital companionship is affection

Marital companionship is partnership

The Hebrew word translated “companion” in Malachi 2:14 is *chever*, translated in the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible—*koinonos*, which in English is commonly translated “fellowship.” The word means both partner and pleasurable friend, co-worker and comrade. Here we consider the first meaning: partnership.

Some synonyms for partnership are alliance, coalition, guild, or merger for the sake of accomplishing a task. It is the coalescing of a labor force for the sake of accomplishing more, and was often employed in the marketplace. So, for example, Jehoshaphat partnered with Ahaziah *to build ships* (2 Chronicles 20:35-36); two friends partner together *to pick each other up, to protect each other from the elements, and to defend against an enemy* (Ecclesiastes 4:10-12); and James and John were partners with Simon *to catch fish* (Luke 5:10). Partners, then, are members of the same team working together *to accomplish a mutually beneficial goal*.

What does this mean for marriage? Marrieds, if they desire to grow together, must go somewhere, work at something, or at least aim toward a goal. If a married couple does nothing but talk about their friendship, they will never become good friends. C.S. Lewis explains:

Lovers are always talking to one another about their love; Friends hardly ever about their Friendship. Lovers are normally face to face, absorbed in each other; Friends, side by side, absorbed in some common interest.⁷⁶

To use Lewis’ depiction, lovers stand face to face, consumed with each other, oblivious to surroundings; friends stand side by side, arms linked together, eyes on the distant horizon focused on a common goal. In a marriage partnership, there is, to be sure, a time for absorption in each other, but if the marriage disintegrates into nothing but absorption, the absorbed will soon grow antsy, or bored, or worse, disinterested. Marriage is a merger to accomplish what we could not accomplish separately, a guild in which we serve God with the gifts in that guild, a partnership in which each supports the other, supplying what the other lacks, and being supplied where lacking. What are the goals of marriage? Some were already mentioned: oneness and opposition (simultaneously completing and sharpening each other); washing one another with the gospel (beautification); encouraging each other to press on toward the Last Day (presentation). Other worthy goals are children, fruitfulness in a career or calling, reaching out to the poor, the helpless, the unconverted, the hurting,

⁷⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*. NY: Harcourt, 1988; p. 61.

and befriending brothers and sisters in the church, to name a few. The opportunities are endless; the possibilities enormous.

As spouses partner with each other, there is, as with all partnerships, a lot of work to be done. If you partner with your spouse, you will sweat and cry and bleed, if not physically, then spiritually, relationally, and emotionally. If you have children, you will wear out physically; if you befriend the needy, you will be taxed financially; if you reach out to the hurting, you will be drained emotionally. If you evangelize the lost you'll be challenged spiritually. Partnership is work.

John and Betty Stam partnered to bring the gospel to China through the China Inland Mission, and partnered, soon into their work as missionaries, and shortly after they married, to raise a daughter, Helen by name. Their studies made them sweat, their trip to China cost them relationships and security, and eventually, their marriage partnership cost their lives. Three months after John and Betty became parents, while living in China, communist rebels seized them, marched them twelve miles from Tsingteh to Miaosheo, and confined them to an abandoned house. John, Betty, and baby Helen awaited they knew not what, but surmised what might be. Betty prepared Helen for her absence, putting what little diapers and money she had in Helen's sleeping bag, and the next morning the rebels came for John and Betty. The two of them were led up a little hill outside of town, and ridiculed by the rebels who called the locals to watch the execution. One man pleaded for their lives, but the others stood silently by, too terrified to speak, and then came the order: "Kneel." John did calmly, Betty with a quiver, and side by side, after a quick command, the sword swung from behind. Both were martyred. Sweat, tears, and blood marked their partnership, but a delightful partnership it was for them, not only by their accounts, but according to onlookers themselves. Betty Stam's sister, Mrs. Mahy, writes this about John and Betty shortly after they married:

Of Betty and John's last year I have two especially vivid impressions. One is the long walking and preaching trip they took among the mountains...They were wonderfully happy and exhilarated over it and over doing it together...The other impression is the anticipation and preparation for that little one. I realized during the months before she came that Betty was making more loving and careful preparation for her than I had over both of mine put together. She and John discussed many possible names for the baby, and their letters were crammed full of their love for her...I devoured those letters even more eagerly, I think, than the ones about their evangelistic journeys.⁷⁷

More recently, a retired couple from Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada, Rients and Margaret Mazareuw, decided to use their gifts, he a carpenter and she a nurse, to minister in Papa New Guinea through Pacific Island

⁷⁷ Mrs. Howard Taylor, *The Triumph of John and Betty Stam*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1935; p. 114.

Ministries. They recently returned home to Canada, having decided not to return to Papa New Guinea after about 3 years of missionary work, but through their partnership, they have not only become the dearest of friends to each other, but have accomplished much work on earth for God's glory.

In partnership with your spouse you will notice times of refreshing. Whether in trial or success, the sharing of life builds a friendship, or should. Ever listened to W.W. 2 veterans reminisce about combat? Ever watched the 1985 Chicago Bears do the Super Bowl shuffle? Have you seen Hub (Robert Duvall) and Garth (Michael Caine) in *Secondhand Lions* reminisce about past experiences? Have you been on a trip with friends and years later mused over the glories of what you saw and did? What makes these conversations enjoyable is the people have been through thick and thin together—they have been through good times and bad. Marriage is similar. Does this mean things are always “peachy” throughout the relationship? No. But through perseverance in partnership the relationship grows. A friendship builds. A companionship forms.

Life-long companions learn each other's in and outs, and can, quite literally, predict what each would say or do in a given circumstance. You can read each other's minds so much so that the shuffle of a foot or a quick glance or even dead silence communicates a paragraph, a chapter, even a book, for behind it are years of marital education. While living in Pella, IA, Rachelle and I were privileged to visit the elderly in our church on their birthdays. In one instance, while visiting a saint widowed several years prior, the responses to our questions and conversation were quite striking. Upon asking the lady about marriage to her deceased husband, she immediately shed tears of admiration and respect, and when asked about her choices of residence, church, and activities since his death, she replied, with a respect and dignity so profound I scarce can forget it, “I live where I do, attend church where I do, and spend my time the way I do because, though I am widowed, my husband was a godly man whom God gave me for my good, and I am confident this is where my husband would want me to live, this is where he would want me to attend church, and these are the activities he would want me to do to serve the Lord for my remaining years.” I remember a particular urge, driven not by sympathy and sensitivity but by foolishness, to say, “But you are free from your husband (Romans 7:2); you may live as you deem most godly and wise.” Thankfully, by God's grace, realizing this sister had read Romans 7 more times than I had lived years, my lips opened but my diaphragm pushed no air, and in a brief moment of silence the beauty of her statement soaked in. She was not a slave to her deceased husband, but a student of God's providence in giving her the husband He did. She had partnered with her husband, had studied him, and had so learned to view life through the lens of his godly reasoning that to abandon her former husband's wisdom would have been, to her, akin to abandoning the means God gave her to grow in Christ. The marriage partnership they built served them long after the marriage ended.

Question

For the past 5 years my husband has seldom mentioned his love for me. He and I are very busy, and I know he loves me by the way he treats me, encourages me, and cares for me and our children, but should I be concerned he seldom, if ever, verbalizes his love for me? Is there anything wrong?

When at least one spouse encounters increased demands at work, ill health, or seasons of prolonged stress for whatever reason, verbal expressions of love and affection may fall by the wayside. If you absolutely need these, you should, as kindly as possible, ask your husband to make every effort to express verbally his love for you. But, to answer your question more directly, there is nothing inherently wrong. The two of you may be very busy, and so mentally consumed with your callings you seldom have time to think what to say to each other, and instead serve each other not with words but with deeds. John Calvin is not particularly well known for warmth of expression, and, if the absence of correspondence between he and his wife is any indication, he thought it less important to express verbally the fervency of his love to his wife, Idelette, and more important to get about the work to which God called each of them. Nonetheless, he loved her dearly, and, like your husband, expressed it by the way he lived. And, if, in this regard, your husband is anything like John Calvin, the warmth of his love for you may be more often expressed to his friends, and may take your absence to elicit from him, in word, its expression. Consider the letter Calvin wrote to Pierre Viret on April 7, 1549, shortly after Idelette's death:

Although the death of my wife has been exceedingly painful to me, yet I subdue my grief as well as I can...Had not a powerful self-control, therefore, been vouchsafed to me, I could not have borne up so long. And truly mine is no common source of grief. I have been bereaved of the best companion of my life, of one who, had it been so ordered, would not only have been the willing sharer of my indigence, but even of my death. During her life she was the faithful helper of my ministry. From her I never experienced the slightest hindrance. She was never troublesome to me throughout the entire course of her illness; she was more anxious about her children about herself. As I feared these private cares might annoy her to no purpose, I took occasion, on the third day before her death, to mention that I would not fail in discharging my duty to her children. Taking up the matter immediately, she said, "I have already committed them to God." When I said that was not to prevent me from caring for them, she replied, "I know you will not neglect what you know has been committed to God."⁷⁸

Marital companionship is camaraderie

⁷⁸ Michael A.G. Haykin, *The Christian Lover: The Sweetness of Love and Marriage in the Letters of Believers*. Lake Mary: FL: Reformation Trust Pub., 2009; pp. 9-10.

Having considered the first nuance of “companion” (Malachi 2:14), we consider the second nuance: camaraderie. Some synonyms are: enjoyable togetherness, pleasurable friendship, or heartwarming closeness. Every human heart longs for camaraderie, and such longing is usually expressed in with sayings like, “I don’t want to grow old alone” or “I want to grow old with you.”

When marital companionship grows, your spouse becomes your crony, your best friend, your most enjoyable companion. Even when times are tough, when you feel like you cannot live with them, you are still more frightened by the prospect of living without them, and soon discover that camaraderie is the aspect of friendship which wants to experience *all* of life *with* a particular person. When two people marry they are saying, “I have no idea where we will live, where we will work, where we will vacation, how we will get along, or what we will be doing 5, 20, or 50 years from now, but I know one thing: I want you with me wherever I go. You are not merely someone I can live with, but someone I cannot live without.”

One of the hardest parts of single life, for those who do not want to be single, is lacking someone to share life with. When sick, there is no spouse to tend you; when depressed, no spouse to encourage you; when sad, no spouse to cry with you; when worried, no spouse to ground you. The years come and go, and the unshared experiences of each leave us feeling a bit lonely, a bit empty, a bit unheard and unnoticed. To be sure, we may share experiences with friends and family, but many singles who pause long enough will discover a void in their life which can only be filled by a spouse.

Marrieds, by contrast, need only live to enjoy the phenomenon of camaraderie. No expensive vacations need happen, no wonderful travels, no adrenaline-pumping activities. Daily life together is a joy when shared. You vacation together, sleep together, pray together, travel together, go to church together, raise children together, rejoice together, suffer together, and do everything else in life together. Your spouse becomes your best friend of either sex, the one whose company you prefer over all other company, and one whose company makes you oblivious to societal norms. If society labels canoeing barbaric, married couples who enjoy canoeing canoe anyways; if society deems reading books boring, marrieds read on; if society says walking is for the elderly who cannot run, married comrades keep walking; if society considers holding hands cheesy, an unacceptable PDA (public display of affection), the couple holds anyway; and if society regards playing games at home with just the two of you humdrum, lackluster, even spiritless, you play on. Best friends come up with their own fun, their own ways to enjoy each other, and the better friends they become, the less they care what others think. Such is marital camaraderie.

Now, what does all this mean for marriage? A few things. First, marry your best friend. Have you heard the old clichés for explaining away a mate, “She is too much like a sister to me” or “He is too much like a brother to me”? Such clichés sound, on the surface, like valid argumentation, but are

actually invalid for biblical marriage. If marriage is companionship, meaning both partnership and camaraderie, marrying your best friend is a good idea, maybe even the best idea. But don't take my word for it, observe marrieds yourself. Which marriage would you desire for your own: the one inspired by erotic self-interest, consumed with both extremely positive and extremely negative passions, and which one moment appears unbreakable but the next is shattered and nearly over; or, the one inspired by deep friendship, lasting joy, genuine fondness for each other and contentment, and, unannounced to you, a highly romantic friendship? If you marry a sex-object, your marriage will be the former, and you will soon wear out. There is a reason volatile marriages end quickly. No two people have the energy to battle it out with another for decades, and if your relationship is built on sex or self-interest, you'll do nothing but battle. But if you marry your best friend, you will, by God's grace, enjoy their camaraderie much more than the erotics enjoy their momentary sex, and, as an added bonus, sex will be infinitely more fulfilling and satisfying than that of the self-interested, no matter what the relational "experts" may say.

Second, children, friends, and neighbors come and go, but your spouse has come and will not go until death knocks. Therefore, by God's design, not a child, a friend, or a neighbor is meant to be a surrogate spouse. If parents lean on children to be surrogate spouses, both the parent and the child will be crushed: children are not meant to handle the emotional weight of being a surrogate spouse—they need a parent not a spouse. And if we make another adult a surrogate spouse, replacing companionship with our spouse with another, our marriage will fade quickly. Husbands and wives must diligently guard the inner ring of marital camaraderie, not out of hate for others, but out of love for each other. Pre-nuptial relational agreements, then, should be avoided at all costs. If spouses enter marriage with the idea that marriage should not, and will not, disrupt any of their current friendships or social obligations, the marriage is off to a rough start. Husbands and wives who reserve, unconditionally, for themselves a "guys" or "ladies" night out are erecting huge obstacles for marital companionship. Marriage rearranges, or should, all prior friendships, so that the moment you marry, your spouse, if they have not yet become, must become your best friend, and be treated as such.

Third, be wary of relationships with the opposite sex, whether at work, in the neighborhood, or in the church. Husbands, be cautious of women who come too close, and respect those women who intentionally keep their distance. If you provide your wife security, encouragement, and uplifting compliments, plenty of women will seek such from you, desiring to be in the place of your wife, and some will care not about wrecking your home if only they can acquire your attention. Don't let them in. Wives, be careful of men who come too close relationally, and respect those men who intentionally keep their distance from you. There are plenty of men who, for various

reasons, would love to have what you offer your husband, and some will try to acquire it no matter the cost to your marriage.

Finally, there is nothing wrong or wimpish about admitting need for camaraderie. Humans beings were not meant to live in isolation. Just ask Adam: he was lonely (Genesis 2:18), and the moment he awoke to Eve, he sang joyfully, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23). With the exception of the gift of singleness, men and women were made for marriage. Consider one author’s reflections on her need for marriage:

Referring to plummeting marriage rates and changing views toward marriage in the United States, a recent cover of Time magazine asked the question, “Who Needs Marriage?”

I could name all the reasons our culture does. But I’ve written that column more than once. Here I’ll answer the question more personally: I need marriage. Or at least I very much desire it.

After acknowledging she needs marriage, Betsy Hart details the trials of raising her four children without a husband (she was divorced five years prior to writing this article), and then abruptly segues from her family’s need for a father to her need for a husband:

But marriage is certainly not, ultimately, about sharing parenting, which has a limited shelf life anyway. At least it shouldn’t be. *It’s about sharing a life.*

As a woman, I want to feel protected and cared for by a husband. I believe I’m — gasp! — built to want that.

But it’s also about what I believe I’m built to uniquely give to one man committed to me: my support, respect, admiration and encouragement, and all without ever trying to make him my best girlfriend! Without a spouse, right now I’m not able to give full expression to those things.

...I even need the conflict of marriage. Really. Bearing with a man, with someone so different than me, giving him the freedom to fail and loving him anyway, would again stretch me as a human being. A lot.

Humbly receiving that same forbearance from him? Well, that’s part of what I need too.

This is all very different than being “needy,” by the way. I’m happy in what I consider a very full, interesting and fun life.

And on the flip side, having been married for 17 years, I’m quite aware that no man or woman can ultimately meet another’s needs anyway.

But I believe that men and women were built to need and want each other, and give to each other, in a very unique way in marriage...

In other words, I don’t deaden myself to the good and powerful desire for marriage, as I fear so many people today do...

Maybe that's why I just don't feel defensive, or less than the strong capable woman I am, when I openly admit that when it comes to the question, "Who needs marriage?" the answer is, "I do."⁷⁹

Christian or not, we were built for companionship.

Before we move to marital affection let me comment on the gospel of marital companionship. If you have been married for a while you know how hard it is to treat your spouse like a companion: we often treat them, or want to treat them, more like combatants than comrades. There is only one cure for such a problem: the good news of your friendship with Jesus. You see, unless you have been loved by, and are currently soaking your heart in, the perfect partner, the perfect comrade, the friend who sticks closer than a brother (Proverbs 18:24), Jesus Christ, you will find it hard, or impossible, to love your spouse this way. You must know, believer, that your struggle to partner with your spouse and to be their comrade, is infinitely smaller than Jesus' struggle to become your partner and comrade. Don't you know that for the joy that was set before him, the joy of having you, the joy of living with you eternally, the joy of making you His friend, the joy of being married to you—for the joy of befriending *you*, Jesus endured the cross, despising its shame, and is seated at the right hand of God.

Jesus Christ is the true friend whose love is so great He laid down His life for us (John 15:13-14). And Jesus' friendship is so genuine and powerful that the Preacher foreshadowed it centuries before Jesus was born:

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Think about this text in terms of Jesus' friendship with you, Christian. Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their toil, but Jesus worked Himself to death, *all alone*, and now *shares with us* the reward of His toil: fellowship (*koinonia*) with God (1 John 1:3-7). If two friends fall, one will lift the other up, but in the Garden of Gethsemane, while Jesus fell to His knees, his friends fell to their knees, asleep, and as He glimpsed the cup of wrath He had no one to help Him up. Twelve hours later, on the Cross, He drank the cup to the last drop, and, on account of our sins, and God's wrath against them, was knocked over with no friend to help Him up: He fell into death that He might lift us from death to life; He fell into hades that He might lift us from hell to heaven. Friends comfort each other with the warmth of their presence, but Christ hung utterly alone, left out in the coldness of rejection, rejected by His friends, and forsaken by His Father, so

⁷⁹ Betsy Hart, *Chicago Sun-Times*, "Who Needs Marriage? She Does." December 2, 2010 (italics, mine).

that we might be comforted by His never-failing presence. And Jesus is the friend who fought Satan for you, all by Himself, and was prevailed upon, at the cost of His life, so that you would be strengthened to withstand the devil. Don't you see, believer, that every benefit of your friendship with Jesus comes to you at His expense? We were no friends of His, yet He befriended us, performed all the work of a faithful friend, and now supplies us with all the benefits of a friendship we lifted not a finger to establish.

What does this gospel have to do with marriage? This: until you have been befriended by the Ultimate friend, Jesus Christ, and until your friendship—your partnership and camaraderie—with Jesus blossoms, your marriage will remain cold and distant. Jesus redefines friendship by dying for His enemies! He redefines friendship by embracing as friends His enemies who lifted not a finger to help Him when He needed it the most, and as such a friend, He empowers husbands and wives to be just that kind of friend to each other: friends who work together for a great reward; friends who lift one another up when fallen; friends who comfort each other with the warmth of their presence; and friends who, twisted, with Jesus, into a three-fold cord, defend each other from Satan's attacks. Is your marriage such a friendship? Is it becoming one? Do you desire it? Drink deeply of the gospel of Jesus' friendship, and not only will you want Him as your sacrificial Savior and Friend, you will become such a friend to your spouse.

Question #1

My spouse is urging me to de-friend all members of the opposite sex with whom I was friends while single. I assure my spouse I love him/her only and am not interested in a member of the opposite sex, but to no avail. Should I de-friend members of the opposite sex? It seems so rude.

In marriage, what two people are saying, in effect, is, "Though the world contains roughly 3.5 billion members of the opposite sex, I have decided, and promised, to give myself completely to you to the neglect of all others." When you marry, you make a public declaration that you are off the market, that you will no longer check out other options, that you will live so as not even to hint you are available, and that you will make it crystal clear, especially to members of the opposite sex, you are committed to your spouse.

If you befriend a member of the opposite sex, however, you are, by the very act itself, neglecting friendship with your spouse, and thus saying to your spouse, in effect, "Since I receive friendship and companionship from others, and so don't need that from you, you're really nothing more than a sex object to me. I want to share a bed with you, but not my life." So, to answer the question more directly, it would be a wise idea to de-friend members of the opposite sex to the extent your spouse prefers.

Question #2

What place should humor have in our marriage? My wife and I like to joke with each other, but as we observe other couples who seldom, if ever, joke, we wonder if we're allowing humor to damage our marriage. Any advice?

The only advice I have is taken from the marriage of Martin and Katharina (Katie) Luther. Katie was herself a tremendously industrious, and brilliant, worker, something about which Martin teased her in letter. She planted their fields, sold their cows, netted fish from their pond, cared for their orchard, brewed beer, managed their finances (Luther was prodigally generous, to a fault), boarded all visitors in their home, raised their children, and cared for her frequently sick husband. Luther never missed an opportunity to humor her about her work, addressing her in letter with embellishments, "To my beloved wife, Katherine, Mrs. Dr. Luther, mistress of the pig market, lady of Zulsdorf, and whatsoever other titles may befit thy Grace."⁸⁰ With all the work to which God called the Luthers, we might expect they co-existed in a stoic, serious-minded, no-nonsense marriage. But such was not the case; there was plenty of humor. On one occasion, when Luther was away on ministerial business, he wrote Katie about how he was prevented from traveling to Eiselben because the Saale River overflowed its banks, and, not wanting to risk drowning, he decided to wait for the waters to recede before proceeding. He concluded the letter,

I am sure that, if you were here, you too would have advised us to proceed in this way; so, you see, *at least once we are following your advice.*⁸¹

In another letter, the contents of which follow, Martin having heard Katie was extremely worried about him, he uses humor, and copious sarcasm, to encourage her to stop worrying and trust the Lord:

Martin Luther to the holy lady, fully of worries,

Mrs. Katharina, doctor, the lady of Zolsdorf, at Wittenberg, my gracious, dear mistress of the house

Grace and peace in Christ! Most holy Mrs. Doctor! I think you very kindly for your great worry which robs you of sleep. Since the date that you started to worry about me, the fire in my quarters, right outside the room, tried to devour me; and yesterday, no doubt because of the strength of your worries, a stone almost fell on my head and nearly squashed me as in a mouse trap. For in our secret chamber [the toilet room] mortar has been falling down for about two days; we called in some people who merely touched the stone with two fingers and it fell down. The stone was as big as a long pillow and as wide as a large hand; it intended to repay you for your holy worries, had the dear angels not protected me. Now I worry that if you do not stop worrying the earth will finally swallow us up and

⁸⁰ Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*. NY: Meridian, 1977; p. 228.

⁸¹ Michael A.G. Haykin, *The Christian Lover: The Sweetness of Love and Marriage in the Letters of Believers*. Lake Mary: FL: Reformation Trust Pub., 2009; p. 3 (italics, mine).

all the elements will chase us. Is this the way you learned the Catechism and the faith? Pray, and let God worry. You have certainly not been commanded to worry about me or yourself. “Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you,” as is written in Psalm 55:22 and many more passages...

Your Holiness' willing servant,
Martin Luther⁸²

Marital companionship is affection

One of the hardest things about watching a marriage dissolve into a sea of hatred is there was a time when both spouses adored each other. But somewhere along the line wedges were inserted into the relationship, wedges which were allowed to fester and grow, eventually driving the two apart. And though neither spouse planned it from the beginning, one of them usually ends up living like the proverbial adulteress, or the Israelite men, both of which left the companions of their youth:

[An adulteress] forsakes *the companion of her youth* and forgets the covenant of her God.

Proverbs 2:17

Why does [the LORD not regard or accept our offerings]? Because the LORD was witness between you and *the wife of your youth*, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.

Malachi 2:14

In each instance, the phrase “of youth” offers the key to understanding marital affection. One commentator, commenting on the ugliness of the Israelite men divorcing their wives for more attractive, pagan women (who says the Bible's outdated?) says this about the wrong committed by the men against their wives:

She whom you thus wronged was the companion of those earlier and brighter days, when in the bloom of her young beauty she left her father's house and shared your early struggles, and rejoiced in your later success; who walked arm in arm with you along the pilgrimage of life, cheering you in its trials by her gentle ministry; and now, when the bloom of her youth has faded and the friends of her youth have gone, when father and mother whom she left for you are in the grave, then you cruelly cast her off as a worn-out, worthless thing, and insult her holiest affections by putting an idolater and a heathen in her place.⁸³

⁸² Ibid; p. 4.

⁸³ Thomas V. Moore, *A Commentary on Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi*. Banner of Truth, 1993, pp. 362-363.

When a man and woman first marry, they have nearly no affection for one another in the sense of long-standing relational trust. The marriage relationship, then, usually commences with great eagerness, each spouse excited by the newness of having an entire human being dedicated solely to them. The emotions and passions stirring throughout the engagement, and especially throughout the first months of marriage, are delightful. Most newlyweds, I suspect, during the first few months of marriage, draw sustenance for the marriage from the newness and exuberance of their spouse. This should not be frowned upon. Newlywed couples should not be discouraged from enjoying the blissful moments when two unfamiliar people become one flesh, literally, and all of life is, for a moment, lived on cloud nine or ten.

What should be discouraged is any attempt to live the duration of married life in this emotional bliss, as if the newness of your spouse ought to remain new and exciting five, ten, or twenty years into marriage. The exciting, the unusual, the new, and the extraordinary may sustain a marriage for the first while, but it cannot, and was probably never meant to, sustain your marriage for the long haul. Eventually, an endearing affection, which, if you ask any happily married couple married for 40 plus year is every bit as, even more, enjoyable than the initial bliss, must replace the bliss. If it does not, the wives oftentimes become adulteresses, and the husbands become like the Israelite' men to which Malachi refers: each forsakes the companion (wife) of their youth. Once the emotional high wears off and bliss turns into bills, and highs into hives, each spouse must confront a startling reality: Marriage love is ordinary, and in that, marriage love is extraordinary. The initial glow fades into something more substantial and genuine. Martin Luther sanguinely states it:

The first love is drunken. When the intoxication wears off, then comes the real marriage love.⁸⁴

I had the privilege of pastoring, for a brief time, a man who had been married to his wife 63 years, and by his testimony enjoyed the years of his wife. I visited him each week, and each time he began, saying, "I miss my wife." As I recall, she had been gone for less than a year, so the pain of her absence was keenly felt and manifested in his tears. After acquainting myself a few weeks, I began probing his marriage, expecting to find some hidden secrets useful for decades of marital delight, so I asked him what he missed most about his wife. He said, "I miss my wife sitting in her favorite chair and knitting." I thought I must have heard him wrong, so asked for a repeat, but there was no miscommunication. He missed her sitting in her favorite chair, knitting. Having been married, at the time, for a whopping three years, I thought, "My, how times have changed. I hope my wife knitting in her favorite chair is never what I miss most about her. Maybe older generations are just different." But older generations are not, and I am

⁸⁴ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*. NY: Meridian, 1995; p. 235.

glad to say I had it all wrong. This man's comments to me opened my eyes to an aspect of marriage previously obscured from my eyes by the sensational. What I had missed was the kind of affection which can only grow in the soil of the ordinary, the boring, the usual. Interestingly, though such affection appears mundane, it is stronger than the most passionate love on the planet. Let me explain.

The Greeks denoted this kind of love *stergo*. *Stergo* is a family love, a usual love, a love which loves the ordinary and the daily. Some synonyms for it include loyalty, fidelity, bondedness, devotion, allegiance, and constancy. And though this love is much stronger than *eros*, the love for the extraordinary and the passionate, few married couples ever really enjoy this love. Those who do wouldn't trade it for the world, but most never make it this far. Plenty of people *put up* with the ordinary, and some *hate it*, but the affectionate spouse *loves* the ordinary.

Before we unfold the intricacies of this love, here is the opposite. It's opposite is a marriage grown cold with time, and eventually ending with at least one spouse complaining about the other, "They just aren't what they used to be." As the adulteress in Proverbs 5, a married woman takes the most energetic years of her husband's life, and then leaves her husband to marry someone with more income earning potential, more security, or more time to work out at the gym. As the Israelite men in Malachi 2, a married man steals the beautiful years of his wife, puts her through child birth and other bodily changes, and then trades in his bride at the age of fifty for two women half her age, or for someone with more spark and spunk. The thought of each saddens the soul, but it happens all the time. What have these marriages been all along? How can two people who loved each other so passionately leave each other so easily and coldly? They can do it because their entire marriage has been a relationship of personal advantage and ecstasy which never matured to commitment and affection.

What each marriage needs, if it is to blossom into maturity, is what C.S. Lewis called affection:

Affection takes people for granted, which is an outrage in erotic love, but right and proper up to a point. It fits the comfortable, quiet nature of the feeling. Affection would not be affection if it was loudly and frequently expressed; to produce it in public is like getting your household furniture out for a move. It did very well in its place, but it looks shabby or tawdry or grotesque in the sunshine. Affection almost links or seeps through our lives. It lives with humble un-dress, private things; soft slippers, old clothes, old jokes, the thump of a sleepy dog's tail on the kitchen floor, the sound of a sewing-machine, a gollywog left on the lawn.⁸⁵

Before two people become married, it is often the unusual, the extraordinary, the special, or the dramatic that attracts us to them. But once married that changes, or should change. Affectionate love grows in the

⁸⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*. NY: Harcourt, 1988; p. 34.

soil of ordinariness. Affectionate love defies the odds. It is familiar, not exotic or risky; it is comfortable, not exploratory; it is sure and solid, not fleeting; idiosyncrasies become favorites; annoyances evoke laughter (well, not in all cases). Your spouse begins to appreciate your peculiarities because they see they alone are privy to them. No one else is allowed to see the oddities. Thus, words and actions which may outrage the public, endear spouses to each other in private, for when our spouse does things in private which they would never do in public, they are saying, in effect, "I am so close and comfortable with you that I can do things which I would never do in front of someone else. You should feel privileged." And we should, most of the time.

When you see in your spouse an aspect of life they share with no one else, that aspect becomes a source of endearment. Tears become less scary and more endearing if they seldom cry in public. Talking with a mouth full of food, messy eating, poor table manners, body odor, morning breath, and pillow hair all have the potential (there are limits) to endear spouses to each other. The more comfortably our spouse lives in our presence, the more two have become one flesh. When we were dating, we hid idiosyncrasies, but the longer we live in marriage, idiosyncrasies become the very things we cherish. When two people become one flesh, they live before each other as they would live before themselves. They view burping in front of us as burping in front of themselves, crying in front of us as crying in front of themselves, and eating in front of us as eating in front of themselves. All embarrassment fades as we grow into one flesh, and when you grow into it, you no longer want to live without it. In fact, when affectionate love so characterizes your marriage, you become humorously skeptical of too much excitement or spontaneity or change in your spouse. You want them just as they are because you have grown accustomed to them. Their ordinariness provides us with some sort of subconscious security. Any big changes, then, mean we have to adjust and accommodate the new "them", and after a while, we lose ability, or desire, to adjust. When spouses love each other just the way they are, affectionate love has arrived.

In some settings, being a creature of habits is boring, but in marriage creaturely habits are appreciated, even habits which outside of marriage would be repulsive. When marriages have grown affectionate, snoring becomes the enemy of loneliness; smells, even the bad ones (minus the restroom, of course) become comforting; annoyances evoke laughter; birthmarks and moles become beautiful; knitting becomes a spectator sport; and messiness becomes just one more opportunity to store treasures in heaven through service.

C.S. Lewis, in his chapter on Christian Marriage in *Mere Christianity*, offers a lengthy and helpful explanation of the difference between the immature thrill of "being in love" and the mature thrills of a more "sober interest":

People get from books the idea that if you have married the right person you may expect to go on “being in love” for ever. As a result, when they find they are not, they think this proves they have made a mistake and are entitled to a change—not realizing that, when they have changed, the glamour will presently go out of the new love just as it went out of the old one. In this department of life, as in every other, thrills come at the beginning and do not last. The sort of thrill a boy has at the first idea of flying will not go on when he has joined the R.A.F. and is really learning to fly. The thrill you feel on first seeing some delightful place dies away when you really go to live there. Does this mean it would be better not to learn to fly and not to live in the beautiful place? By no means. In both cases, if you go through with it, the dying away of the first thrill will be compensated for by a quieter and more lasting kind of interest. What is more (and I can hardly find words to tell you how important I think this is), it is just the people who are ready to submit to the loss of the thrill and settle down to the sober interest, who are then most likely to meet new thrills in some quite different direction...

This is, I think, one little part of what Christ meant by saying that a thing will not really live unless it first dies. It is simply no good trying to keep any thrill: that is the very worst thing you can do. Let the thrill go—let it die away—go on through that period of death into the quieter interest and happiness that follow—and you will find you are living in a world of new thrills all the time. But if you decide to make thrills your regular diet and try to prolong them artificially, they will all get weaker and weaker, and fewer and fewer, and you will be a bored, disillusioned old man for the rest of your life. It is because so few people understand this that you find many middle-aged men and women maundering about their lost youth, at the very age when new horizons ought to be appearing and new doors opening all round them. It is much better fun to learn to swim than to go on endlessly (and hopelessly) trying to get back the feeling you had when you first went paddling as a small boy.⁸⁶

God loved us in precisely this way. After the “thrill” of foreordaining our redemption, and the joy of announcing it throughout history, the sobering reality of the plan hit, and hit hard, and whatever thrill was left, left quickly, “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.” But the more sober interest, “Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will” prevailed, and now, this side of Calvary’s hell, a new thrill is born, the thrill of the joy that was set before Him, but a joy which demanded He first endure the Cross (Hebrews 12:2). For the infinite thrill of having you, Jesus endured the sober interest of the Cross, and now, in similar fashion, if the thrill of an affectionate marriage interests you, you must endure the sober interest of daily life. When you do, new thrills emerge from you know not where, and you know not why, but you nonetheless know, and appreciate, and, after a while, would choose never to live without.

⁸⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. NY: HarperCollins, 2001; pp. 110-111.

The Intimacy of Marriage

A Physical Relationship

For those interested in a detailed treatment of sex in marriage, plenty of books have been written, but the best one is still Song of Solomon, and yes, the Holy Spirit really, with all the eroticisms, wrote it. God's sex ethic is not Victorian, but passionate, for His love for us is not discreet or dirty, but explicit and lovely. We might, without bringing the marriage bed to the town square, learn from this.

My focus in this chapter is on the *place*, not the performance, of sex within marriage, and is primarily an exposition of the phrase, "the two shall become one flesh" (Ephesians 5:32). For those desiring *kama sutra* like information, this chapter will be of no use, but for those desiring biblical teaching on the importance and proper use of sex within the marriage covenant, this will be less a waste of your time, but, as always, the possibility of being a waste of your time remains.

In the Greco-Roman world, people did not marry for physical intimacy; men married for social standing in the community, women married for security, and both married for children, but neither married for sex—sex was sought elsewhere. In the 4th century B.C., Demosthenes wrote:

For this is what living with a woman as one's wife means—to have children by her and to introduce the sons to the members of the clan and of the deme [borough], and to betroth the daughters to husbands as one's own. Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of our persons, but wives to bear us legitimate children and to be faithful guardians of our households.⁸⁷

And Xenophon, a 4th century B.C. philosopher and historian, writes this about Grecian marriage:

Of course you don't suppose that lust provokes men to beget children, when the streets and the brothels full of means to satisfy that? We obviously select for wives the women who will bear us the best children, and then marry them to raise a family.⁸⁸

A wife's duty toward her husband was to oversee household matters and bear legitimate children, children which, it was expected, would one day advance their father's reputation in the community and care for him in old age. A husband's duty to his wife was to provide life's necessities and impregnate her. As you can tell, then, Paul's instructions to the Corinthians on sexuality were not only necessary, but startlingly radical:

⁸⁷ Barry Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness: How the storyline of Scripture affirms the single life*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010; p. 183.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*; p. 184.

The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and like wise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. *Do not deprive one another*, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

1 Corinthians 7:3-5

Reading Paul's instruction on marriage today, in sexualized America where marriage is not so much an institution for social status and security as it is an agreement to extend, for a time, the romance of lovers—till “sex bores” do you part—may elicit a, “Well, duh...of course married couples should have sex together.” But such was not the case in Paul's day, and no such response would have been made, at least not in Corinth. Over against the culture of his day, Paul says sexual intimacy belongs *inside* marriage, and should be a regular part of the marriage relationship (of course there are always exceptions: health, distance due to war, age, child-birth, etc.). His advice flew in the face of his day's conventions, and it offends our modern sensibilities no less. Married men continually, and sinfully so, find sexual fulfillment, or titillation, outside marriage, looking at pornography, staring at images of the partially dressed, imagining what it might be like with so-and-so, or even joking crudely about women, or, worse yet, demeaning the physical beauty of their wives. What lesson might we learn from Paul's teaching on sex? We might learn this: since love making is designed by God to take place within the confines of marriage only, husbands and wives should define physical beauty by each other. The longer a husband is married to his wife, the more her physical shape should appeal to him, though, by worldly standards, and by all outward appearances, her physical shape may be, and probably is, deteriorating (aging and/or children ensure this). And the longer a wife is married to her husband, the more his physical shape should appeal to her, though, due to aging, muscles which formerly resided in his chest and shoulders have, over decades, migrated South and permanently relocated just above the beltline, and are, incidentally, no longer muscle. Once married, our spouse must redefine our standards of sexual beauty, meaning, that though Calvin Klein is not actively seeking a modeling contract with them, they should become more and more attractive to us as the years progress. How is this possible? It is possible when we realize external beauty is inextricably bound up with the beauty of commitment and godliness, which is why, for example, Madonna, though outwardly beautiful, is, if you have even a faint knowledge of her relationships with men, not so attractive after all. Yet a spouse who is wholly committed to you for life, who serves you day in and day out, and who has committed their life to serving Christ, grows increasingly attractive, though the outward appearance fades. As a rusted out car with a blown up engine can be made to appear beautiful, from a distance, with a

fresh coat of paint, and as truly ugly writing often resides beneath an aesthetically pleasing cover and witty title, so are we duped into thinking external beautiful, disconnected from godliness, is genuinely beautiful. It's not; it's a façade with no content, a mirage with nothing to give you but baked sand. Slowly, then, spouses who spurn one another on to godliness and minister to each other through life's ugliest times, each grow, in the eyes of the other, extremely beautiful, and when this happens, you'll find sex no longer about making love with an abstract amalgamation of skin, bones, and various other body parts in differing degrees of shape, but about enjoying full exposure and intimacy with a total person: your best friend, fellow Christian, counselor, confidant, and the one who washes your dirty underwear and laughs at your lame jokes.

Why is love making in marriage so important? Because without it (noting, of course, the exceptions), spouses drift apart and are tempted to corrupt the marriage bed. Such corruption devastates not only society, but also, and especially, the church, which is why the Holy Spirit exhorts Christians to keep careful watch over their sex lives:

Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.

Hebrews 13:4

What is the point? This: God intended sex to be *enjoyed* inside marriage. If physical intimacy is seen as something dirty, marriage will be despised. If it is seen as something beautiful, marriage will be embraced. Whatever we say about sexual intimacy in marriage, though it is not the basis of marriage, it is oftentimes the litmus test for the quality of marriage. Sex is usually the first thing to disappear in marital conflict, and usually the last thing to return after conflict resolution.

Depending upon your age and cultural moors, speaking of sex within marriage will offend variously. If you are Victorianly prudish, you'll be offended by the very act of speaking about it, but if your sensibilities arise from the attitude of the late 1960's, you'll be offended by the speaking of sex *within marriage only*. Both perspectives have their weaknesses, and both their strengths, but both lack a biblical foundation.

The prudish cast a sort of shadow upon sex, almost as if sex were inherently sinful, and almost as if *real* Christians rise above sex, but weak Christians, if they must, and only because they sinfully lack self-control, are *allowed* to have sex, yet should make every effort to wean themselves from it. Such teaching is like throwing rocks at a pressure cooker, eventually, it's going to blow up. God created sexual intimacy, and thus *deep within each human being is knowledge that sex has a proper use*, so it is no surprise the sexual prudishness of the 1940's and 1950's gave way to the sexual abandon of the 1960's and 1970's. The conservatives worshiped freedom *from* sex; the liberals responded by worshipping the freedom to have sex, and to have it anytime, anywhere, and with anyone they please. Pressured to abhor sex, young adults indulged it instead, and while the prudish were wrong to treat

sex as something dirty, the free-spirited were wrong to exploit it by using it outside marriage. And now, due in large measure to both the prudish, and those who rebelled, we live in a day C. S. Lewis predicted, a day in which male perceptions of true, female beauty have been re-engineered by the affectionate uncle Screwtape, the world's chief nuisance, Satan himself:

We have engineered a great increase in the licence which society allows to the representation of the apparent nude (not the real nude) in art, and its exhibition on the stage or the bathing beach. It is all a fake, of course; the figures in the popular are falsely drawn; the real women in bathing suits or tights are actually pinched in and propped up to make them appear firmer and more slender and more boyish than nature allows a full-grown woman to be...As a result we are more and more directing the desires to something which does not exist—making the role of the eye in sexuality more and more important and at the same time making its demands more and more impossible. What follows you can easily forecast.⁸⁹

What follows has been a sexual revolution where underdressed and undressed women fill magazines, billboards, television and computer screens, swimming pools and beaches. Our wives, unless we continually affirm the exclusivity of our sexual desire for them, feel pressured to compete with air-brushed beauties who live at the gym, eat rice cakes, never have morning breath, wake up beautiful, appear ready for sex all the time, and seldom frown—at least not on camera. If your wife lives in the real world—working, studying, or raising children—she doesn't have a chance against the ladies who live in a dream, and whose sole purpose in life is to pull you out of reality into a dream. But this should come as no surprise, for every culture fashions, and worships, the goddess of female beauty. The Egyptians borrowed Qetesh from the Canaanites; the Greeks worshiped Aphrodite; the Romans had Venus; and we sophisticated Westerners, not wanting to be outdone, have perfected the worship of female beauty, having begun modestly, of course, with a small shrine of goddesses, usually one per generation (Jean Harlow, Mae West, Norma Jeane, Lana Turner), we've now created, and financially backed, organizations whose sole purpose is to expand the shrine, and as if this were not enough, we broadcast our shrine worship over the internet. Now all nations can worship the goddess, and, sickeningly so, in the style of their choice. If you like a more conservative worship service, Hugh Hefner leads worship at the Playboy church; if you like macho, manly worship you can attend Maxim's service; and if classy worship with a well-trained symphony orchestra is your thing, check out Victoria's Secret cathedral. Female beauty has always been a cultural goddess, but now, more than ever, she has become *the* goddess, the *great* goddess. Whereas former cultures worshiped her *polytheistically*—as one god among equals, a god alongside many others—Western culture worships her *henotheistically*—as one god with no equals, a god above all gods. But

⁸⁹ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*. NY: HarperCollins, 2001; p. 107.

though her prominence has changed, her nature has not, for to this day she is still a goddess of lies and false promises, a goddess who offers just enough hope to draw men in and destroy their marriages before leaving them out to dry. And therefore every man, especially Christian men, must know something important about the goddess of sex: *she promises genuine satisfaction, but never makes good on it, and, instead, strangles you to death slowly*. If you listen to her she will persuade you; if you follow her she will slaughter you; if you go after her she will cut you open and remove all your organs; and if you worship her, she will destroy not only your marriage, but you yourself: you will become her indentured servant, and she, a taskmaster straight from hell, will work you 24 hours a day in the sweat shop of addiction, with no pay, until she's sucked every last drop of life out of your heart and soul. Not much has changed:

With much seductive speech [the adulteress] persuades him; with her smooth talk she compels him. All at once he follows her, as an ox goes to the slaughter, or as a stag is caught fast till an arrow pierces its liver; as a bird rushes into a snare; *he does not know that it will cost him his life.*⁹⁰

Our culture touts sex outside of marriage as delightful, something which brings lasting happiness. Yet if you observe the effects, lasting happiness is the last description you would offer. The sexually promiscuous who indulged the goddess shed tears of loneliness; the children brought into the world as unwanted byproducts cry tears of hopelessness because their parents are more interested in sex than in raising them; the women who lent their bodies to men cry tears of destitution; and the men who follow the goddess are angry and cold, unable to establish deep, intimate relationships with other people, and finding themselves, over and over, used for their wealth. The goddess of sex outside marriage is a damnable tyrant, a wolf in sheep's clothing, the dark devil himself masquerading as an angel of light.

The Bible teaches that sex outside marriage is empty and miserable. When two people perform the act of sex outside marriage, each person is saying to the other, in effect, "I love you, but not that much! I love you sexually, but not emotionally, not spiritually, not relationally, not financially. I love you enough to use you for sex, but not enough to commit to you for life." Therefore, no matter how good the sex is, it is never genuinely pleasurable.

Sex outside marriage destroys, sex inside marriage builds, and can take you to exquisite heights of joy in the presence of your spouse. If you have had the immorality of sex outside marriage thumped so deeply into your soul that you wonder whether or not sexual intimacy in marriage should be enjoyed or endured with a frown lest the "joy" police catch you, be assured, for heaven's sake, and your sake, and your spouse's sake, that your spouse is a gift to you, from God, for the enjoyment of sexual intimacy. What are you waiting for? Husbands and wives should enjoy each other, and, rather than

⁹⁰ Proverbs 7:21-23.

focusing attention on everyone we are not allowed to have, we should direct our gaze to the one we may have, and do have, and with whom we ought to be having intercourse. Flirt with your wife; lust after your wife; fill your hands and eyes up with her, and should your nagging conscience call you dirty and vile for such, silence it with Scripture:

Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love.

Proverbs 5:18-19

Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the work of a master hand. Your navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine. Your belly is a heap of wheat, encircled with lilies. Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle. Your neck is like an ivory tower. Your eyes are pools in Heshbon, by the gate of Bath-rabbim. Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon, which looks toward Damascus. Your head crowns you like Carmel, and your flowing locks are like purple; a king is held captive in the tresses. How beautiful and pleasant you are, O loved one, with all your delights! Your stature is like a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters. I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its fruit. Oh may your breasts be like clusters of the vine, and the scent of your breath like apples, and your mouth like the best wine.

Song of Solomon 7:1-9

No one who had not carefully gazed upon, studied, felt, and tasted his beloved wife could write such endearing words about her. Gaze upon your wife; study her beauty; feel and taste her, and in so doing, delight in her emotionally, sexually, and relationally.

If you'll allow me, I'd like to laugh with you, and with Dorothy Sayers, at the priggish view of sexuality frequently taught by the church, and which was common in the churches of England in the 1950's:

What does the church think of sex?

God made it necessary to the machinery of the world, and tolerates it, provided the parties (a) are married, and (b) get no pleasure out of it.

What does the church call sin?

Sex; getting drunk; saying 'damn'; murder; and cruelty to dumb animals; not going to church; most kinds of amusement. 'Original sin' means that anything we enjoy doing is wrong;⁹¹

What is her point? Her point is to parody a legalistic view of sex so that we might—heaven forbid—laugh, and soon after get back to enjoying sex within marriage. I know, I know, I just conjoined that nasty word “enjoyment” with “sex” again, but conjoined they stay, by God's design, in the context of marriage. *Wives*, not fiancés, not girlfriends, and not random

⁹¹ Dorothy Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church: The Dogma Is The Drama*. W Publishing Group, 2004; pp. 17-19.

women, are the God-ordained means for guilt-free, Christ-exalting, God-glorifying sexual satisfaction.

For the rest of the chapter we'll spend time exploring the implications of God's design for sexual intimacy in marriage. The first implication is for young ladies: don't be foolish enough to believe a man who whispers into your ear, "I love you; please come to bed with me." Instead, look him in the eye and tell him, "If you love me, then you won't have a problem making a public declaration of your love for me in a wedding service, and thereby promising to give your entire life to me: your finances, your time, your energy, your future, yourself, and everything else!"

Another implication is spouses should make every effort to be sexually active with each other, giving each other the conjugal rights due each other:

Even in the complete matter of sexual adjustment in marriage the Bible is not silent. A solution to all difficulties whatsoever in this aspect of life may be discovered in self-denial. "The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does." No explicit textbooks on physiology can touch the chief problem of sexual disharmony—selfishness. In any other marital strife, difficulties are resolved only by self-denial. Women must deny self to help and support husbands. Men must think first of the well-being of their beloved bodies, their wives."⁹²

Along these same lines, John Piper offers trenchant advice to both husbands and wives on serving each other in sex:

Husbands, if it is your joy to bring her satisfaction, you will be sensitive to what she needs and wants. You will learn that the preparation for satisfactory sexual intercourse at 10pm begins with tender words at 7am and continues through the day as kindness and respect. And when the time comes, you will not come on like a Sherman tank, but you will know her pace and bring her skillfully along. Unless she gives you the signal, you will say, "Her climax, not mine, is the goal." And you will find in the long run that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

Wives, it is not always the case, but usually it seems that your husband wants sexual relations more often than you do. Martin Luther said he found twice a week to be ample protection from the Tempter. I don't know if his wife, Katie, was up for it every time or not. But if you're not, give it anyway, unless there are extraordinary circumstances. I do not say to you husbands, "Take it anyway." In fact, for her sake, you may go without. The goal is to outdo one another in giving what the other wants (Rom. 12:10). Both of you, make it your aim to satisfy each other as fully as possible.⁹³

A third implication is for single adults, and especially those engaged to be married: *if Jesus Christ is not enough for you now, then marriage will crush you*. If you look to people or things, rather than to Christ, to satisfy

⁹² Walter Chantry, *The Shadow of the Cross*. Banner of Truth, 2009; p. 54.

⁹³ John Piper, *This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Permanence*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009; p. 134.

the deepest cravings of your soul, then you will use your spouse to satisfy those cravings, and you will crush them! A creature, even a supermodel husband or wife, and great sex, cannot satisfy your soul. To paraphrase Saint Augustine, your heart was made for God, and it will be restless until it finds its rest in Him. No creature can withstand the weight of god-hood or supply you with what only God can supply. Single men, then, should cultivate a passionate love-relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, and single women should look to Jesus for emotional fulfillment.

Another aspect of this truth is if your sexual life is not under control when you enter marriage, it will not be under control in marriage. Sex inside marriage does not remove sexual immorality from our mind and heart. If, as a single man, you fornicate with yourself, or with other women, or if you lust endlessly after women, whether through pornography or illicit glances at various female features below the shoulder and waistline, such fornication and lusting will not supernaturally cease when married. If you can, you should repent to God of these sins prior to marriage, and find a brother you trust to confess these sins to and hold you accountable for them on a daily or weekly basis. If you don't, you will likely crush your wife with an over-sexualized view of marriage, making her feel more like a sex object for use than a friend to cherish and love.

A fourth implication is simple: if you burn with sexual desire, seek a wife. "If [the unmarried] cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion" (1 Corinthians 7:9).

The last implication is: when seeking a spouse, seek your best friend, not a sex object.⁹⁴ If it was possible to build a solid marriage on external beauty and incredible sex, the most robust marriages would be in Hollywood. But, as it is, Hollywood marriages come and go like Indy cars, at least if Britney Spears' 55 hour marriage, and Kim Kardashian's 72 day marriage are any indication. But why? Because it is impossible to build a solid marriage on sexual attraction. Spouses are best friends journeying hand-in-hand down "Sanctification Boulevard" toward "Holiness Hotel." They are not sex objects for self-centered use. So if you enter marriage not with your best friend, but with an object of your sexual desire, then one of three things will happen: *One*, your marriage will end in *official* divorce because the true source of sexual pleasure is friendship, not body type. *Two*, your marriage will end in *functional* divorce, and though you never

⁹⁴ It is often asked, "How do I know if I am marrying a friend or a sex object (a lover)?" In *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis offers this diagnostic:

Lovers are always talking to one another about their love; Friends hardly ever about their Friendship. Lovers are normally face to face, absorbed in each other; Friends, side by side, absorbed in some common interest.

Do you pursue common goals, common interests, and godliness together, or do you just stare at each other in self-absorption? Friends pursue and accomplish; lovers waste away in idleness. Of course, spouses should be lovers too, but not to the exclusion of friendship.

sign the papers, you will merely co-habitate in perpetual frustration; *Three*, your marriage will become delightful because you stopped viewing your wife as a sex object and became her best friend. God has designed sexual intimacy to operate solely within the confines of a total, committed relationship, so if you separate sexual intimacy from relational, financial, emotional, psychological, and spiritual intimacy, sex becomes awkward, empty, and meaningless. Physical nakedness must be preceded by relational nakedness to be enjoyed:

The monstrosity of sexual intercourse outside marriage is that those who indulge in it are trying to isolate one kind of union (the sexual) from all the other kinds of union which were intended to go along with it and make up the total union. The Christian attitude does not mean that there is anything wrong about sexual pleasure, any more than about the pleasure of eating. It means that you must not isolate that pleasure and try to get it by itself, any more than you ought to try to get the pleasure of taste without swallowing and digesting, by chewing things and spitting them out again.⁹⁵

When two people engage in intercourse outside marriage, they are saying, in effect, to each other, “I love you, but I don’t love you that much. I like you enough to use you for what I can get out of you, but I don’t love you enough to commit to you. I am willing to become physically vulnerable, but not financially, emotionally, or spiritually vulnerable to you.”

But even in marriage, if the relationship is out of whack or tumultuous, sex will be unfulfilling, or not as fulfilling as it could be. Not until we have become “one flesh” in all aspects of marriage will sex be genuinely fulfilling. In the words of C.S. Lewis, if we are not financially, emotionally, relationally, and spiritually “one flesh” with our spouse, sexual intimacy will be as pleasurable, and as awkward, as chewing food, sucking the taste from it, and spitting it back out. A husband who substitutes an emotional connection with the television for his wife, is probably going to have a sexually frustrated, and turned off, wife, and couples who manage their finances separately, making decisions out of self-preservation, will seldom enjoy one another—it’s hard to enjoy someone you don’t really trust.

If you prefer an up to date, first hand report from an expert in the field of relational intimacy, feel free to read what Lauren Lankford wrote in an article for *Relevant* magazine, entitled, “The Friends with Benefits Epidemic” (warning: puritanical readers may be offended):

It’s not just in the movies. How have we convinced ourselves to bend the rules of intimacy? Friendships and sex have been around since the beginning of time, but it’s our generation that puts them into the same phrase—and the same bedroom. From high school hallways to movie theater screens, “friends with benefits” is sold to us as a new combination as simple, acceptable and wonder as mac-and-cheese.

⁹⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. NY: HarperCollins, 2001; pp. 104-105.

No one wakes up and decides sex is just sex, or making out is just making out. No one wakes up and announces over coffee, "Today, I'm going to fall head over heels in love with someone I'd never marry." I didn't.

I remember being a freshman in high school, believing heart and soul that I would wait for marriage to have sex. I'd never kissed a boy, and I didn't plan on it until I was engaged. Fast-forward four or five years, and I've made out for fun, for comfort, for love and for revenge. Fast-forward another two or three years, and I'm sleeping with someone I'm not even dating.

...Sex is some of the greatest glue for marriage—and the enemy has every intention of attacking your marriage before it even starts. If he can twist, harm or destroy your marriage, he knows he does the same for your picture of God's unconditional love and commitment to you. Furthermore, friends with benefits also deteriorates the value of your other relationships. Single or marriage, God intends for you to have trustworthy, iron-sharpens-iron friendships untainted by cheap affection or half-hearted romance.

Not only is sex the perfect image of intimacy, passion and desire, it triggers the release of chemicals that train your body to remember what feels good, and how to get it again. Dopamine is a natural drug that gets you high. This is what keeps you going back again. Drugs like methamphetamine access dopamine to achieve the same effect. Your body begins such a bond just with cuddling, kissing, and everything between there and "real" sex. Oxytocin is dopamine's partner, the emotional binding agent that teaches you to trust and reduces fear.

However, dopamine and oxytocin don't play fair. They don't care if it's just for fun, if it's 'just this one night' or if the person you're going home with is going to be around next week. They don't care if it's make-up sex, breakup sex, or all-the-way sex. They don't care if you just "mess around," or if you go all the way. They're going to feed your addiction, commitment or not.

Consider the repercussion of programming your body to trust someone you shouldn't—to be vulnerable with someone you know will cause pain in the withdrawal phrase.

You were created for hot, passionate sex. You were created to be connected to one person, without ever going through withdrawal. You were created for whole, healthy friendships—unscarred by broken or inappropriate intimacy.

But more than that, you were created to experience unconditional, committed love. When we compromise emotional and physical intimacy before commitment (whether or not we intend to), we sabotage ourselves. And it hurts. Badly. Either now, later or both.

The myth of friends with benefits programs us to believe intimacy doesn't last, love is selfish, desire exists for you and only matters in the right now. But God's definition of love is always sacrificial—and will always be around.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Lauren Lankford, "The Friends with Benefits Epidemic", from *Relevant*, Thursday, July 21, 2011: www.relevantmagazine.com/life/relationship/features/26256-the-friends-with-benefits-sensation.

The Mystery of Marriage

A Christ-Exalting Relationship

When people hear the word, “Mystery”, they think of something akin to the old board game “Clue” or the television show, “Unsolved Mysteries.” Mystery means something unsolved, unknown, or which cannot be figured out. So using the word “mystery” in the context of marriage may seem odd, or, if you’re married, not odd at all—the word may supply you fitting vocabulary for the confounding relationship (you’re not alone!). When I first read Ephesians 5:32 as a young adult, I thought of mystery in terms of *compatibility*. “Why are *those* two people married to each other? They’re so incompatible. Why do homebodies marry social butterflies? Why do type “B” personalities marry type “A’s”? And why do country folk marry city slickers? Alas! This is a very great mystery to me.” After I married, I began thinking of mystery in terms of *sanity*. “What was God thinking when He designed marriage? Or, better yet, why would He allow the continuance of a relationship which brings two very sinful people, with competing preferences and very different upbringings, under the same roof? Alas! This is a very great mystery to me.” And, I trust, if your marriage has outlasted the honeymoon, you have, at one point or another, asked God, “Lord, I’m not the least mechanically inclined, but I have a better chance rebuilding my car’s engine than I do operating this “thing”, which is more like a monster, called marriage. Was Sherlock Holmes married, and, if so, did *he* solve it?”

But neither the Holy Spirit, nor Paul, had any such notions of mystery. The word mystery in the Bible refers to something hidden in times past, which is now revealed in Jesus Christ. Read the first three passages carefully, noticing especially how the word “mystery” is used, and then read the fourth passage on marriage:⁹⁷

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the *mystery* that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed...

Romans 16:25

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the *mystery* of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time...

Ephesians 1:9

To me...this grace was given...to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the *mystery* hidden for ages in God who created all things...

⁹⁷ See also Ephesians 3:4,8; Colossians 1:24; 4:3.

Ephesians 3:8

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This *mystery* is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

Ephesians 5:32

What does it mean that marriage between a husband and wife is a mystery—a *profound* mystery so great it shocked the Apostle when he discovered it? It means this: When God instituted the marriage of Adam and Eve, He was really announcing the relationship between Christ and the church. A quick re-reading of Ephesians 5:32 should prove it, “...the two shall become one flesh.’ This mystery is profound, and I am saying that *it refers to Christ and the church.*” The mystery of two becoming one flesh refers not first and foremost to a husband and wife, but to Christ’s relationship with the church, with Christians. And what is more, God instituted marriage even before the Fall of mankind! Before Adam and Eve ever needed a Savior from sin, God created the marriage of Adam and Eve to hint at the way Jesus Christ would become one flesh with us by coming in the flesh! Now that’s amazing symbolism on God’s part, and the meaning is profound: From the very beginning in Eden, God created marriage to reflect the more significant relationship of Jesus Christ to the church. Marriage, then, is nothing more than a parable of Christ’s redemptive love for His bride. Just when we thought the Bible was all about us, we find that from the very beginning, even before sin entered creation, the universe was all about Jesus Christ, and we, simple humans we are, exist for His glory, and to exalt His glory.

Without much ado, there are some radical implications worth consideration and meditation. The first of which is: Christian marriages *must* be less about spouses, and more about Jesus Christ. One way we can make our marriages more about Christ than ourselves is by using marital failures to point each other to Christ. What does this look like? Negatively, husbands, when your wife lets you down, and she will, probably soon, let the feeling of being let down encourage you toward the marriage supper of the Lamb, when you will be married to Jesus, the perfect spouse who will never let you down. Every one of your wife’s failures should cause you to hunger and thirst more for the presence of Christ, both now on your knees, and in the future face to face. Wives, every time your husband fails to love you perfectly, and he will, probably within the next ten minutes, allow his failure to draw your attention to the perfect spouse, the spouse your heart longs for, the Lord Jesus Christ whose love for you never disappoints! Positively, husbands and wives, the best experiences in marriage should make us long more for Christ. The best intercourse, the best friendship, the best vacation, the best experiences, should leave us marveling at what God has in store for us! Have you ever, at the climax of sexual intimacy, or at the

heights of friendship when your joy together climaxed in stomach-splitting laughter, have you ever, at those times of pure delight, considered what infinitely more glorious and joyful fulfillment awaits you at the coming of Christ? If marriage can bring us, even if only temporarily, to such exquisite heights, then what grand satisfaction and joy will be ours at the coming of Christ, when our flesh unites with His flesh and we are brought into soul-satisfying communion with the Lover of our souls, a communion so satisfying that the most joyous marriage in the world, multiplied a billion times over, is not worthy to be compared to the joy which will be ours at the consummation of our marriage with Christ. O, Lord Jesus, come quickly.

The second consideration is for parents, and provides us with perspective on displaying Christ before the eyes of our children. John Piper offers this instruction,

The most fundamental task of a mother and a father is to show God to the children...God has ordained that both mother and father be involved in raising the children because they are husband and wife before they are mother and father. And what they are as husband and wife is where God wants children to be: As husband and wife, they are a drama of the covenant-keeping love between Christ and the church. That is where God wants children to be. His design is that children grow up watching Christ love the church and watching the church delight in following Christ. His design is that the beauty and strength and wisdom of this covenant relationship be absorbed by the children from the time they are born.⁹⁸

What our children need most is the drama of redemption lived right in front of their keen eyes. They need to see a mother and father, daily, sinning against one another, repenting of real sins to one another, and, after kneeling at the Cross of Christ, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave them. Our children need to see parents who need Christ not just for salvation, but for sanctification, and not just at set times of the day, but all day. Our children need parents who so explicitly depend on Christ that if a stranger asked one of our children what is the one thing we make most of in marriage, the one thing upon which we feed our thirsty souls and nourish our hungry hearts, the child would reply, without hesitation, and from his own observation, "Jesus Christ: they drink His blood and eat his flesh, for they believe that in Him, and in Him alone, they have life." Are we showing our kids Christ, or ourselves? Do we live, in repentance and forgiveness, with Christ at the center of our lives?

Third, and very important: marriage grows only *in* Christ, never *beyond* Christ. The moment you stop talking about Christ, and living as though He were an ever present reality in your lives, at that moment your marriage begins deterioration.

⁹⁸ John Piper, *This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Permanence*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009; pp. 143-144.

Fourth, marriage is a temporary institution. I recently conducted the funeral of my maternal grandma, and though her funeral was not devastating—she was, after all, a Christian who lived 87 years—what hurt was listening to her husband of 66 years, my grandpa, anticipate the inevitable pain of loneliness. It was a sobering reminder that marriage is temporary, not permanent,⁹⁹ and exists only to point to Jesus Christ. The painful day *will* come, if the Lord delays, when one spouse is gripped by death's cold, bony fingers. As surely as spouses marry with joy, so surely will they depart in sorrow. The wages of sin is death, and therefore written over the gateway to every marriage is an inviolable decree that though they part not till death, death will part them. Why, then, if every life-long marriage ends in death, should we continue to marry? John Piper, writing to his wife Noel about their marriage, offers this answer:

[Our marriage] is a parable of permanence written from eternity about the greatest story that ever was. The parable is about Christ and his church. It has been a great honor to take this stage with you. What exalted roles we have been given to play! Someday I will take your hand, and stand on this stage, and make one last bow. The parable will be over, and the everlasting Reality will begin.¹⁰⁰

Christians marry to display, and know more deeply, the covenant keeping love of Christ for His own.

Is there any good news concerning Christ, with which we can end this chapter, and along with it, this booklet? There is indeed: In our relationship with Jesus Christ, we have a marriage we cannot destroy, for, on account of our sin, He was destroyed, so that our sin might no longer destroy our relationship with Him! That is good news! Every other relationship we enter threatens termination if sin rampages unchecked. But in Christ, we are in a relationship, a marriage, with a Savior who promises, who commits, and who guarantees that, since He has dealt with our sin, cancelling our debt, and restoring our peace with God, He will love us unconditionally

Furthermore, in our marriage to Christ, we have a relationship which will fully, and finally, satisfy. I don't recommend you tell your spouse what I am about to say, but the two of you should be living it daily: our spouses cannot fulfill the deepest, relational desires inside us; only God can. Actually, I recommend you tell them. In our heart of hearts we long for a relationship which satisfies the soul, a relationship which our spouse can only tickle, only awaken us to, and only make us hungry for, but never fulfill. So if your marriage relationship is good, don't forget you are unable to fully satisfy your spouse, not so much because you don't want to, but because the

⁹⁹ Matthew 22:30.

¹⁰⁰ John Piper, *This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Permanence*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009; p. 180.

heart of your spouse was made for God, not for you, and therefore they will be uncomfortably restless until it rests in God. The best thing you can do for them, then, is point them to Christ. But if your marriage is not good, do not lose sight of the coming Day when all your relational needs, needs which are now unmet and painfully neglected, will be fully satisfied by Jesus Christ. Beyond your wildest imagination, Jesus Christ will satisfy every unfulfilled longing with His sacrificial, and dotting, love.

I pray that we will all recognize the deepest and highest meaning of marriage—not sexual intimacy, as good as that is, not friendship, or mutual helpfulness, or childbearing, or child-rearing, but the flesh-and-blood display in the world of the covenant-keeping love between Christ and his church...

Very soon the shadow will give way to Reality. The partial will pass away into the Perfect. The foretaste will lead to the Banquet. The troubled path will end in Paradise. A hundred candle-lit evenings will come to their consummation in the marriage supper of the Lamb. And this momentary marriage will be swallowed up by Life. Christ will be all and in all. And the purpose of marriage will be complete.¹⁰¹

Jesus testifies, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! Come quickly.

¹⁰¹ Ibid; pp. 175,178.

Appendix I: Additional Resources for Marriage

- Chapell, Bryan. *Each for the Other: Marriage as It's Meant to Be*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006.
- Chapman, Gary. *Covenant Marriage*. Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2003.
- Chapman, Gary. *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate*. Chicago, IL: Northfield Pub., 2004.
- Chester, Tim. *Gospel-Centered Marriage: Becoming the Couple God Wants You to Be*. Published by The Good Book Company, 2011.
- Driscoll, Mark, and Grace Driscoll. *Real Marriage: The Truth about Sex, Friendship, and Life Together*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012.
- Eggerichs, Emerson. *Love and Respect: The Love She Most Desires, The Respect He Desperately Needs*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004.
- Harvey, Dave. *When Sinners Say "I Do": Discovering the Power of the Gospel for Marriage*. Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2007.
- Keller, Timothy J. with Kathy Keller. *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*. New York, NY: Dutton, 2011.
- Kostenberger, Andreas J. *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding The Biblical Foundation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004.
- Mahaney, Carolyn. *Feminine Appeal: Seven Virtues of a Godly Wife and Mother*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004.
- Mahaney, C.J. *Sex, Romance, and the Glory of God: What Every Christian Husband Needs to Know*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004.
- Piper, John. *This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Permanence*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009.
- Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*. Edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006.
- Tripp, Paul David. *What Did You Expect?: Redeeming the Realities of Marriage*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010.

Appendix 2: Reformed Confessions on Marriage

Westminster Confession of Faith

Chapter 24: Marriage and Divorce

1. Marriage is to be between one man and one woman. It is not lawful for any man to have more than one wife, or for any woman to have more than one husband, at the same time.¹⁰²
2. Marriage was ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife,¹⁰³ for the increase of mankind with legitimate offspring and of the church with godly children,¹⁰⁴ and for the prevention of sexual immorality.¹⁰⁵
3. It is lawful for all sorts of people to marry who are able to give their intelligent consent.¹⁰⁶ Yet it is the duty of Christians to marry only in the Lord.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, those who profess the true reformed religion should not marry unbelievers, Roman Catholics, or other idolaters;¹⁰⁸ nor should Christians be unequally yoked by marrying those who are notoriously wicked in their way of living or hold to damnable heresies.¹⁰⁹
4. Marriage ought not to take place between persons who are within the degrees of close relationship by blood or by marriage forbidden by¹¹⁰ the Word.¹¹¹ Such incestuous marriages can never be made lawful—so that such persons may live together as man and wife—by any law of man or by the consent of the parties involved.¹¹²

¹⁰² Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4-6; Romans 7:3; Proverbs 2:17.

¹⁰³ Genesis 2:18; Ephesians 5:28; 1 Peter 3:7.

¹⁰⁴ Genesis 1:28; 9:1; Malachi 2:15.

¹⁰⁵ 1 Corinthians 7:2,9.

¹⁰⁶ Hebrews 13:4; 1 Timothy 4:3; 1 Corinthians 7:36-38; Genesis 24:57-58.

¹⁰⁷ 1 Corinthians 7:39.

¹⁰⁸ ARPC edition: “unbelievers or other idolaters”

¹⁰⁹ Genesis 34:14; Exodus 34:16; 2 Corinthians 6:14; See Deuteronomy 7:3-4; 1 Kings 11:4; Nehemiah 13:25-27; Malachi 2:11-12.

¹¹⁰ ARPC edition: “forbidden in the word.”

¹¹¹ Leviticus 18:6-17, 24-30; 20:19; 1 Corinthians 5:1; Amos 2:7.

¹¹² Mark 6:18; Leviticus 18:24-28.

5. Adultery or fornication committed after engagement, if detected before marriage, gives valid reason to the innocent party to break the engagement.¹¹³ In the case of adultery after marriage it is lawful for the innocent party to seek a divorce¹¹⁴ and after the divorce to remarry just as if the offending party were dead.¹¹⁵

6. Although the corruption of mankind is such that people are apt to seek arguments to justify unwarranted separation of those whom God has joined together in marriage, nothing but adultery or such willful desertion as cannot be remedied by the church or the civil authorities is sufficient cause to dissolve the bond of marriage.¹¹⁶ In such cases a public and orderly procedure is to be observed, and the persons concerned are not to be left to their own wills and discretion in their own case.¹¹⁷

Second Helvetic Confession

Chapter 29: Of Single Life, Wedlock, and Household Government

SINGLE PEOPLE: Those who have the gift of celibacy from heaven, so that from the heart or with their whole soul are pure and continent and are not aflame with passion, let them serve the Lord in that calling, as long as they feel endued with that divine gift; and let them not lift up themselves above others, but let them serve the Lord continuously in simplicity and humility (I Cor. 7:7 ff.). For such are more apt to attend to divine things than those who are distracted with the private affairs of a family. But if, again, the gift be taken away, and they feel a continual burning, let them call to mind the words of the apostle: "It is better to marry than to be aflame" (I Cor. 7:9).

MARRIAGE: For marriage (which is the medicine of incontinency, and continency itself) was instituted by the Lord God himself, who blessed it most bountifully, and willed man and woman to cleave one to the other inseparably, and to live together in complete love and concord (Matt. 19:4 ff). Whereupon we know that the apostle said: "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled" (Heb. 13:4). And again: "If a girl marries, she does not sin" (I Cor. 7:28).

THE SECTS: We therefore condemn polygamy, and those who condemn second marriages.

¹¹³ Matthew 1:18-20; See Deuteronomy 22:23-24.

¹¹⁴ Matthew 5:31-32.

¹¹⁵ Matthew 19:9; Romans 7:2-3.

¹¹⁶ Matthew 19:8-9; 1 Corinthians 7:15; Matthew 19:6.

¹¹⁷ Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

HOW MARRIAGES ARE TO BE CONTRACTED: We teach that marriages are to be lawfully contracted in the fear of the Lord, and not against the laws which forbid certain degrees of consanguinity, lest the marriages should be incestuous. Let marriages be made with consent of the parents, or of those who take the place of parents, and above all for that purpose for which the Lord instituted marriages. Moreover, let them be kept holy with the utmost faithfulness, piety, love and purity of those joined together. Therefore let them guard against quarrels, dissensions, lust and adultery.

MATRIMONIAL FORUM: Let lawful courts be established in the Church, and holy judges who may care for marriages, and may repress all unchastity and shamefulness, and before whom matrimonial disputes may be settled.

THE REARING OF CHILDREN: Children are to be brought up by the parents in the fear of the Lord; and parents are to provide for their children, remembering the saying of the apostle: "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (I Tim. 5:8). But especially they should teach their children honest trades or professions by which they may support themselves. They should keep them from idleness and in all these things instill in them true faith in God, lest through a lack of confidence or too much security or filthy greed they become dissolute and achieve no success. And it is most certain that those works which are done by parents in true faith by way of domestic duties and the management of their households are in God's sight holy and truly good works. They are no less pleasing to God than prayers, fasting and almsgiving. For thus the apostle has taught in his epistles, especially in those to Timothy and Titus. And with the same apostle we account the doctrine of those who forbid marriage or openly castigate or indirectly discredit it, as if it were not holy and pure, among the doctrine of demons. We also detest an impure single life, the secret and open lusts and fornications of hypocrites pretending to be continent when they are the most incontinent of all. All these God will judge. We do not disapprove of riches or rich men, if they be godly and use their riches well. But we reject the sect of the Apostolicals, etc.