Every book has a story behind it. Ours started with a conversation between two close friends. As we, Curt and John and our wives, sat around a rough-hewn table in beautiful Forest Falls, California, our discussion revolved around what we had both seen in numerous churches, seminaries, and with Christian couples across our country and beyond . . . something deeply concerning.

Anywhere you look, culture and the courts have changed the role of marriage in society, even changing the very definition of what comprises a marriage. The church of the twenty-first century has tried to carefully navigate this changing landscape of contemporary marriage. But in doing so, it has often chosen to stand back—either confused on what to say or not wanting to sound divisive or demeaning of others, particularly in light of the incredible anger and venom launched at any who dare say anything positive about marriage in its traditional form.

Yet at the same time, this fear of being unkind or out of step with society has resulted in too many shepherds underfeeding their flock! Clear teaching and preaching on marriage from God’s Word has often been set aside or neglected altogether. Uncertain of what to say and wary of controversy, pastors, teachers, and lay leaders have begun to say little or nothing about marriage’s foundation, theology, beauty, and purpose. As a result, as one of our authors, Sean McDowell, will share later, it isn’t that a high view of marriage, based on God’s Word and the reality of His love, hasn’t been “made but found wanting—the case simply hasn’t been made.”

Marriage was designed to be a bright, bold expression of God Himself—His
love, commitment, and redemption. God’s design for marriage with its beauty and reflection of His love cannot be changed or thwarted, no matter what any court or the court of public opinion has decreed. Marriage more than matters! It isn't going away, any more than God's church is going away. Marriage is and remains one of the most powerful pictures of God's love and the gospel.

Yet when we try to fully examine the institution of marriage, or even raise the idea of a theology of marriage today—that is, what we believe marriage is or should be—many Christian couples and even scholars, clergy, and counselors will respond, “We don't actually have a theology of marriage.”

The truth is, we all do have a theology of marriage. But too often it is formed by our experience, the latest trend, a 5-4 high court verdict, or an editorial page. There exists then, in the church and among Christian families today, a great need for marriage, as it’s given to us in God's Word, to be unleashed. From the beginning, marriage, in its beauty and reality was never meant to hold a defensive position! We need not defend marriage, but learn again to elevate marriage to its original glory and beauty.

What we both felt that afternoon in California was the desperate need for a foundational work on marriage that wasn’t just an encyclopedia that catalogues theological ideas and stays on a shelf. Rather, this project should be a tool that could spark and actually launch deep, important conversations between theologians and practitioners. We want to encourage pastors and counselors to engage in the discussion of our day and help lay couples and small group leaders who are serious about marriage know what topics and Scriptures to share and focus on. Above all, this work should lift up God’s intention and design.

**A TOOL TO RAISE UP MARRIAGE**

People may point to divorce rates, outside-of-wedlock births, or increasing cohabitation statistics as ironclad reasons why marriage is outdated or irrelevant. Yet think about what happened on May 19, 2018. Many millions of people around the globe tuned in to watch the royal wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. In St. George’s Chapel, six hundred guests along with the multitude of viewers worldwide—many getting up in the middle of the night to watch the event live—heard from several ministers and readers how marriage is a gift of God, how God is its Creator and Sustainer. They heard of Jesus’ role in bringing love into the center of a couple’s home and world. And they listened to how, from the Song of Songs, the love God brings a husband and wife is a
flame that “many waters cannot quench” and how “If a man were to give all he owned for love, it would be utterly despised.” And even if that man is a prince, “all he owns” is quite substantial—yet still inadequate.

Say what you will, but what was spoken on a beautiful day in a breathtakingly beautiful setting during that service were strong words of God’s role in creating and sustaining marriage. And it was a picture that lifted up millions of people’s view of marriage.

Absolutely, what drew people to watch was celebrity, royalty, wealth, and position—and the desire to be that person in the carriage and castle. Yet people still long for the kind of love they saw in a husband who whispered to his bride (that we know thanks to professional lip readers hired for the event) “You look amazing” and “I am so lucky.” And people with no spiritual understanding or interest still heard and wished for the high words spoken in a ceremony to be true in their own everyday lives and marriages. Even in the reality of our brokenness, where so many marriages fall short, there is a mystery and wonder to marriage that brings even royals to their knees.

What we spoke about that day in California was our committing to doing everything we could to help the church quit playing defense: to work to put marriage, in all its beauty, on display before a world that longs for genuine love and purpose. True, not every wedding event displays acres of flowers, fifty-foot long veils, and hundreds of thousands of well-wishers. But what should remain is the church’s affirmation of God’s place, purpose, and creative design for marriage.

For this to happen, we felt strongly that it would require people across many of the silos we have in the church to begin talking together—to break down the silos and, in our terminology, to begin and sustain a continuing conversation on marriage. With all the challenges and failures linked to marriage, we have God’s amazing and uplifting picture of marriage we can discuss.

There is so much to share about biblical, life- and heart-changing marriage. The conversation begins with the book you hold, which falls into four sections. First, the foundation that undergirds marriage and illuminates the institution’s depth and beauty: including reflections of God’s nature, His commitment to us, language in Scripture, the choice to marry or not. Next, we move into key descriptive aspects of marriage: embodiment, unity and distinction, gender, sexuality. We then go to challenges: dealing with shame, marriages that fall short of the ideal, the difficult topics of divorce and remarriage. Finally, we discuss the mission of marriage, including its place in the body of Christ, its affirmation from natural law, the legacy to future generations. Marriage, even
under attack, may be one of the greatest tools for evangelism available to the church today.

It’s important for us to say upfront that much of what you’ll find here, particularly in the core theology chapters, is not light reading . . . though engaging, challenging, important, discussable. But this work isn’t meant to provide a sprint through a theology of marriage but rather, a deeper dive than many have ever taken before into just why marriage is so important and wonderful as God’s creation.

Accompanying the chapters, you’ll find one or more continuing insight that highlights or applies to that chapter’s content, adding to the conversation based on God’s Word and applied wisdom. These articles will serve to bolster the “talking together” of different disciplines that launches with this book.

As weighty and important as the topics and writers that are found here are, this is not meant to be the final word on marriage. Our goal is to put before the church the highest view of marriage we can, based squarely on God’s Word. But it’s also to launch the conversations we need to have on marriage’s wonder, purpose, and mission that need to be discussed and promoted in our day. As is the case with any collaborative project—and certainly with one on such an important and broad topic—each of the editors brings a different perspective. While we all don’t necessarily see eye-to-eye on everything, we each believe that the collaborative process is worth it, and that it has resulted in an important contribution to our understanding of marriage from a broad evangelical perspective.

There is so much to say and so many experts, both theologically and in ministry and counseling who would have contributed, who we simply did not have space to include to be a part of this book. Our commitment is to provide a place for the conversation to continue. Readers will be able to weigh in at www.continuingconversations.com, a place where each of these chapters and the key topics represented will keep the discussion going. Consider: it isn’t hard to be relevant if being biblical doesn’t matter and it’s not hard to be biblical if being relevant doesn’t matter. To be both biblical and relevant about marriage is the goal of this project. We invite you to the website to be part of the conversation because marriage more than matters!

As you read about the story and language of marriage, may you find inspiration to see more clearly God’s love for His people and more ways to love others like Jesus, beginning with your own marriage and family, and spilling down to your own children, grandchildren, and over a world that indeed needs marriage.
They covered their nakedness. With eyes opened to their broken humanity, the terrible and tragic reality of their sin, the very first thing our primal parents did was cover their naked bodies. The dawn of sin had shed its first dark light on the sexuality of the perpetrators; from this awful new beginning, it exposed a deep rupture in what is so precious to God: male and female he created them. So the first grand cover-up began. In a feeble effort to cover up their sin and shame, to protect themselves not only from themselves but also from God, Adam and Eve attempted to fashion their own rescue—by hiding. Yet nothing sufficed. The fig leaves proved futile, as did the trees of the garden. They were acutely aware of their nakedness, but only God knew what it meant. So he sought them out in that condition, ripe as they were with the potential for sexual distortion and violence, initiating what only an incarnate God could at length complete. He exchanged their coverings with coverings of his own making and eventually exchanged their nakedness—with his own.

The second grand cover-up began many years later, east of Eden, and continues today. It too was preceded by a shame-soaked nakedness. But this time the nakedness belonged to God, hanging on a Roman gibbet, exposed to public ridicule, awash in blood, sweat, and spit. God was doing the unthinkable,
plumbing the depths of our sin—all the way down. He took to himself our fallen nakedness, our sin-compromised sexuality, sanctifying and justifying our sexual perversion in his death and resurrection. He reconstituted our humanity, re-creating us as the image of God: male and female he re-created them.

But even though God became naked for us, we seem to prefer him covered up. As if to insist that our sexuality was not a prime casualty of the fall, and therefore not in need of salvation, we cover up our Savior. Too ashamed and too “modest” to allow God to suffer our sexual sin and shame, we clothe Jesus on the cross. In the first cover-up, God graciously clothed us; in the second, sadly, we return the favor. The irony ought to be revealing. Right at the point where we need God to both judge and redeem our unholy nakedness, we insist that he be clothed.

A crucified but clothed Jesus speaks volumes about the church’s understanding of marriage and sex. If we have only a clothed Christ, how are we to understand and interpret our nakedness? If the Word of God did not subject himself to our nakedness and shame, can he still function as the subject of our words about God at this most crucial of points? When the church is theologically deaf and blind to the implications of God’s self-giving in Christ regarding our sinful sexuality, our broken maleness and femaleness, the clothed Christ may be a powerful explanatory symbol. In clothing and therefore cloaking Christ, we are bound to turn elsewhere for what ought to be a specifically theological undertaking. So the church’s attempts to speak to marriage and sex, and their multitudinous distortions, have too often been merely political, moral, ethical, social, or psychological—but rarely christological, Trinitarian, ecclesial, and sacramental. If the church fails to regard her deepest theological beliefs as pertaining to marriage and sex, then marriage and sex are bound to be understood in relatively trivial ways, and treated accordingly. Do we really believe that the deepest and most intimate human relations can be properly understood and addressed when detached from God’s self-disclosure and self-bestowal? If not, then let us be forthright about it, for marriage and sex are fundamentally theological issues, and unless we wish to relegate our thinking about them to the relative obscurities of moral sentiments and political platitudes, we desperately need to know and say what they have to do with God himself.

We hear often enough about what God hates and thus opposes. From pulpit and paper, from book and blog, we hear variously that God hates divorce, adultery, premarital sex, homoeroticism, and many other sexual and relational sins. What we get far less often are theologically rich accounts as to why God hates and opposes distortions of marriage and sex. Do they break God’s
command, or even more to the point, do they break his image and break his heart? Apart from a christological and Trinitarian account of the beauty, wonder, and mystery of gender and sex, we fear that the church’s teaching will be reduced to moral bromides—even if superficially adorned with biblical proof texts. Primarily, what we hope to offer in this chapter is a description of how marriage and sex are internally and directly, rather than externally and peripherally, related to the gospel of God’s self-giving in Christ through the Spirit, why marriage and sex are thus so very precious and holy, and why that description necessitates a triune and incarnate God.

DIVINE INDWELLING: PERSONS IN INTIMATE UNION

Marriage and sex are not self-explanatory. They are beautiful and sacred mysteries that point beyond themselves to the mystery of our three-person God and to his redemptive self-giving in the incarnation. Theology is meant to found, form, and fund the church’s deepest convictions and experiences, giving holy expression to the meaning of our lives, sanctifying our thought and speech against the inevitable depreciation and trivialization that occurs whenever we divorce the grandest human realities from their divine origin. Marriage and sex surely qualify as issues needing theological interpretation, not only because they exist at the center of our human experience, but also because they were given to us by God as echoes in the created world of who God is and how God loves us. Again, a failure to think theologically where we need it most—that is, at the point of our deepest, most intimate relations—is especially dangerous for the church. Such a failure forces the church to look elsewhere to explain what marriage and sex mean. Just as we cannot grasp the meaning of God’s love for us apart from understanding that God is the very love by which he loves us, we cannot grasp the meaning of our deepest personal intimacies apart from the intimacy that God is. The meaning of these relations, basic and foundational to every human existence, can neither be grounded in nor exhausted by creaturely investigation. “Indeed,” writes Michael Reeves, “in the triune God is the love behind all love, the life behind all life, the music behind all music, the beauty behind all beauty and the joy behind all joy.”

The love, life, harmony, beauty, and joy we were created to experience are echoes of a reality that transcends and interprets them. That reality is the love-creating, life-giving, harmonious, beautiful, and joyful personal communion shared by the Father, Son, and Spirit. The importance of the theological
term *perichōrēsis* [referring to the triune relationship of the three members of the godhead] comes to the fore. [This term has] vast significance for the church’s articulation of the inner life of God in faithfulness to the witness of Jesus Christ, who opens to us the mystery of God’s eternal three-person existence. This term gives sacred expression to the interrelations among the persons of the holy Trinity, asserting no less than that God has eternally been, and will eternally be, a mutually indwelling and interpenetrating communion of persons who exist in self-giving, life-giving love. Indwelling and interpenetrating personal love is *who God is*. God the Father is who he is only in union with God the Son; God the Son is who he is only in union with his Father; and the Father and Son are who they are only in the communion of God the Spirit. The term *perichōrēsis* is important in relation to salvation, directing us to the fact that God does who he is, which is to say that in redeeming us, God the Spirit joins us to God the incarnate Son so that we may share in the life and love of God his Father. The eternal life we receive in salvation is the life shared by the Father with the Son in the Spirit. God loves us and gives us life through the love and life that he is. Without their grounding in the reality of God, life and love become mere abstractions that end up forfeiting their significance—literally, their purpose as *signs*.

The reality of the perichoretic communion that exists among the persons of the Trinity alerts us to a provocative insight that ought to give us pause: the personal and sexual intimacy that Adam and Eve experienced as they became one flesh was not the first indwelling or penetration to occur among persons. It was, of course, the first of all human sexual unions, but the first indwelling or penetration among persons belongs to the eternal union between Father, Son, and Spirit. God is who he is by virtue of the indwelling intimacy shared by the divine persons; apart from it, God would not be his triune self. This most sublime of all realities is reflected in our human existence, for we are who we are by virtue of the indwelling intimacy shared by human persons, apart from which we would not be ourselves.² The existence of every descendant of Adam and Eve depends upon a prior union of persons—necessarily male and female—who share indwelling intimacy. The fact that a human has being is predicated upon the existence of two others joined as one. Thus, any given human being requires two others in such a way that human existence is necessarily and fundamentally tripersonal.

Although it would be difficult to find a more obvious way in which our triune God images himself in us, we would be remiss not to mention another, perhaps less obvious, way: every human literally dwells inside another as he
or she moves from that crucial point of conception to birth—another way in which humanity is defined by interpersonal indwelling.

These echoes of God’s interpersonal life in our own existence might be written off as merely coincidental or forced analogies if not for the striking correspondence between our original birth and our new birth, the original creation and the new creation. In the redemption and re-creation of the world, God the Son was sent by his Father in the power of the Spirit to be birthed into our humanity. He was made one flesh with us that we might be made one flesh with him by the Spirit, and so experience new birth and eternal life in his. Our original existence and our new existence are both constituted by interpersonal indwelling. When God deigned to image himself in our humanity, both in the original creation and in the new creation (Jesus Christ), he did so in a way that is essential to who he is. A truly Christian anthropology, in other words, must be founded on christological and Trinitarian grounds:

What is needed today is a better understanding of the person not just as an individual but as someone who finds his or her true being in communion with God and with others, the counterpart of a trinitarian doctrine of God. . . . God is love and has his true being in communion, in the mutual indwelling of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—perichoresis, the patristic word. This is the God who has created us male and female in his image to find our true humanity in perichoretic unity with him and one another, and who renews us in his image in Christ. ³

MALE AND FEMALE HE CREATED THEM: THE IMAGO DEI

What we have thus far referred to as echoes or reflections of God’s tripersonal unity in human existence have their scriptural origination in the first chapter of Genesis. Here we see that God spoke something about his human creatures that should leave us speechless. Among all that the Father created through and for his Son by the Spirit, God did something utterly unique with his human creatures—he created us in his image: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.’ . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:26–27 esv). The church and her theologians have wrestled with this text for two millennia, attempting to give interpretive expression to the fearful and wonderful blessing pronounced here by God. What exactly does it mean that
humankind is the imago Dei? What is it about humans that constitutes us as God’s likeness? The history of the church’s interpretation on this point is far too vast to recount in the space of this chapter. Suffice it to say that two strands of interpretation have been characteristic. One interprets humanity as the image of God with relation to our rational, moral, or volitional faculties—often called the substantive theory of the image. The other interprets the image in relation to the ensuing mandate for humanity to “rule over” or superintend the creation (Gen. 1:26, 28)—often called the functional theory.

Such theories are indeed helpful in attempting to delineate what marks humankind as distinctive among God’s creatures, as part of an extended accounting for the ways in which we image God. However, they cannot account for something basic to a proper understanding of that image. Specifically, neither theory, as commonly or popularly understood, requires for its application that humankind be what God says we are: both male and female. A male does not require a female, nor does a female require a male, in order to moralize, exercise reason and will, or exercise dominion over the earth. Such things might be done reasonably well by a single human being. But a solitary male or female most certainly cannot image God in a way that is most basic to who he is: depicting his personal, relational, and life-giving intimacy.

Recall our text: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.’ . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”

The plurality in God’s address has been a source of consternation among many modern Christian commentators, who, under the tutelage of the currently dominant mode of historical-grammatical interpretation, tend to hold the doctrine of the Trinity in hermeneutical abeyance in their exegesis of Genesis. The “us” and “our” of God’s self-reference thus become problematic: Who is God talking to? This question necessarily arises for those who insist on delaying the theological, canonical, and Christian implications of the text in search of an interpretation that is strictly suitable to the original author and audience.

We believe, however, that it is incumbent upon modern Christians to recognize the Trinitarian implications of this text, as the church has done for the vast majority of her two-thousand-year existence. “Indeed,” writes Martin Luther, “it is the great consensus of the church that the mystery of the Trinity is set forth here.” Stopping short of a christological, and thus Trinitarian, interpretation of the creation account bypasses Christ’s self-disclosure as the very Word of God by whom all things, including humans, were created (John
For every work or act of creation is threefold, an earthly trinity to match the heavenly.

First, not in time, but merely in order of enumeration there is the Creative idea, passionless, timeless, beholding the whole work complete at once, the end in the beginning; and this is the image of the Father. Second, there is the Creative Energy or Activity begotten of that idea, working in time from the beginning to the end, with sweat and passion, being incarnate in the bonds of matter; and this is the image of the Word. Third, there is the Creative Power, the meaning of the work and its response in the lively soul; and this is the image of the indwelling Spirit.

And these three are one, each equally in itself the whole work, whereof none can exist without other; and this is the image of the Trinity.

—Dorothy Sayers

1:3; Col.1:15–17), the One in whom alone the imago Dei can be properly interpreted.

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381), to which all orthodox Christians subscribe, has us confess belief in Jesus Christ as the One “by whom all things were made,” and in the Holy Spirit as “the Lord and Giver of life,” so that the church may joyfully affirm that God the Father created humankind through and for God the Son by God the Spirit. What is most basic to God’s inner life is wonderfully and fearfully reflected in his human creatures, who, as male and female, specifically as male and female, image the interpersonal intimacy inherent to God’s inner being. Thus, the phrase “male and female he created them” functions to give specificity to the phrase “in the image of God he created [them].” Our existence as male and female is not something that God “tacks on” to the solitary human already in his image. On the contrary, our existence as male and female is intrinsic to that image. This is not to say that being male and female exhausts what we may say about the imago Dei, but that the distinction-in-communion that characterizes humankind as male and female is absolutely basic to the imago Dei. As Colin Gunton writes, God “replicates” his communal being in our humanity:
If, first, to be created in the image of God is to be made male and female, what is implied is that in this most central of all human relatedness is to be found a finite echo of the relatedness of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To be God, according to the doctrine of the Trinity, is to be persons in relation: to be God only as a communion of being. It is that which is replicated, at the finite level, by the polarity of the male and female: to be in the image of God is to be called to a relatedness-in-otherness that echoes the eternal relatedness-in-otherness of Father, Son and Spirit.10

Male cannot properly echo or image God by himself, nor can female by herself. Adam, apart from Eve, could not fulfill what it means for man to be the *imago Dei*—alone, he would have been a distorted, “not good” image: “The Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make a helper fit for him’” (Gen. 2:18). That God pronounced negatively upon his creation at the point of Adam’s solitude is telling: “It is the only negative assessment in the creation narrative,” observes Henri Blocher, “and it is emphatically negative.”11 Something was not right, and it apparently could not be remedied with another male or a beast, either of which might have provided Adam superior strength in tending the garden.12 Would it not be better to say that it was impossible for Adam to be the blessed *imago Dei* by himself, precisely because he could not be male and female—persons in communion?13 That would certainly qualify as “not good,” for it would mean that creation was bereft of God’s image. “In isolation man would not have been good,” writes Karl Barth. “That is, he would not have been created good . . . we might say that it would not be good because solitary man would not be man created in the image of God, who Himself is not solitary.”14 The solitary man can only and ever reflect a unitarian God.

Enter Eve. Into Adam’s isolation, and out of Adam’s flesh and bones, the image-fulfilling Eve was created. What a glorious event this must have been for Adam, and for his Creator! Adam sang for joy as he was joined by the one who was “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen. 2:23), exulting in the fulfillment of humanity, the completion of the image of God: “in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”15 Once Eve was present, humanity was able to reflect the personal and relational intimacy that God is. Eve’s presence meant that humanity could experience life-giving interpersonal penetration and indwelling, a finite and temporal echo of God’s triune, perichoretic life.

So from the time of the first male and female, every human being, every
The image of God, has had something extraordinary in common: each of us owes our existence to both a divine and human union of persons. We are created by, and image, God, who, as a union of persons, is one God. We are also created by, and image, our parents, who, as a union of persons, are one flesh. Personal union is the ground of all human being.

For the church, the sacred beauty of marriage and sex is to be maintained as a “theo-logical” reality whether or not it can be maintained on the level of the world’s abstract ethical or political whims. The church delights in the holy love and intimacy of male and female because the church exists as a sign of the holy love and intimacy that brought humankind into existence. This is why the church must proclaim that the differentiation between, and the union of, male and female is utterly holy and beautiful. Indeed, it is precisely the distinction of our persons that allows for the beauty and holiness of the union—as it is with God. Human persons are defined by both the distinction and the union—as it is with the Trinitarian persons. Humans are distinctly male or female, but neither can exist except for the life-giving union between male and female.16

To celebrate and delight in the holy marriage and sexual union of others is by no means to denigrate the status of the imago Dei in males and females who are themselves not married. Far from it. Every human life is living proof of having shared most intimately in the union between male and female—our existence completely depends upon it. Each of us exists as the living bond between the male and female from whom we came. We are persons, in other words, who necessarily derive our personhood from others. We are not, and cannot be, who we are except by virtue of the one-flesh union of male and female. Contrary to the modern zeitgeist, humans are not self-defined. It is for this reason that the church should view with proper suspicion unqualified talk of the “single” person, for in reality, there is no such person. Each of us, whether or not we are joined in holy marital union, is constituted by interpersonal communion.17 Our lives are not only shaped by way of sexual procreation, but also by the ways in which our nonsexual relational intimacies profoundly affect who we are and how we know ourselves. We share together, and never as isolated individuals, the mystery and wonder of our existence as male and female persons.18

The fall of humankind into sin, however, introduced a rupture in the image. East of Eden, male and female are not how they are supposed to be, created as they were to delight in their distinction and rejoice in their union. In fear and shame they cover themselves and hide, a feeble attempt at self-
justification. The tragedy of the fall, and the corruption and condemnation that followed, manifests itself in the lives of broken images in manifold ways, but perhaps never so clearly as in our broken and distorted intimacies. The differentiation between, and the union of, male and female are utterly sacred, for they echo God’s holy existence. Tragically, then, trespasses against the holy distinction, and violations of the holy union, typify the story of humanity east of Eden. Fractured images muffle and mute the holy echo in myriad ways, joining what should be divided and dividing what should be united. Cornelius Plantinga envisions the fall as entailing both the confusion and disruption of God’s creation:

According to Scripture, God’s original design included patterns of distinction and union and distinction-within-union that would give creation strength and beauty. . . . Against this background of original separating and binding, we must see the fall as anti-creation, the blurring of distinctions and the rupturing of bonds, and the one as the result of the other.19

From this tragic “anti-creation,” male and female are by no means exempt. The unraveling of creation leads to confusions and disruptions that seek to rob males and females of their God-given strength and beauty. These perversions are pervasive among God’s fallen images, and are exacerbated in our attempts at sexual self-definition and self-justification, when we take pleasure in what God does not. What God has joined together, we are prone to separate, and what God has separated, we are prone to join. In either case, the image becomes rather dim. We desperately need to be re-created; we need reimagining.

THE TRUE IMAGE OF GOD: JESUS CHRIST WITH HIS BRIDE

While interpreting the meaning of the imago Dei in humanity must employ careful consideration of Genesis 1 and 2, it must not terminate there; the issue is a canonical one. The incarnate Son of God is the true imago Dei, the fully authentic human person, the fulfillment and destiny of God’s creaturely images. In other words, Jesus Christ ultimately defines for us what it means to be the image of God. When we speak of Christ as the true and perfect image of God, we must avoid the temptation to collapse that image into his deity, as if it were his divine nature, per se, that constitutes him as that image. That would hardly be good news for human beings. The significance of Jesus being the quintes-
sential image of God lies not in his existence as the eternal Son—for whom the ascription “image” would border on blasphemy—but in the fact that the eternal Son has become human. Prior to the incarnation, the Son did not “image” God. The imago Dei is a predicate of created humanity, not humanity’s Creator. God the Son is the true and full image of God precisely because, without ever ceasing to be fully God, he became truly and fully human. The enfleshing of God provides us with the “theo-logic” of the imago Dei.

It was into the confusion and disruption of the anti-creation that this most inexplicable reality transpired. God the Son was born into our flesh. He was born into the world that had been created by him and for him, taking on the humanity he had created. The descriptions of him in Scripture are tantalizing. He is, after all, the “image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Col. 1:15). He is the “exact imprint of [God’s] nature” and the “firstborn among many brothers” (Heb. 1:3; Rom. 8:29). And he is all of this as the second and last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45, 47). In Christ, God is not only re-creating the world and reconciling it to himself, he is also reimaging the world in himself. Jesus Christ is the quintessential image of God, the new Adam through whom creation has begun again. He is the new creation, in whom we are re-created and reborn into the image of God we were originally created to be. In order to enact this astounding act of re-creation, rebirth, and reimaging, the last Adam came to share fully in the humanity of the first. But as with the first Adam, so with the last: to truly image God, he needs his bride. It is not good for him to be alone.

If Jesus Christ is indeed the last Adam, the true fulfillment of the image of God in our humanity, we should expect that he would fulfill what was said of humankind in the beginning: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” If, as we have argued, “male and female” is descriptive of, and basic to, the imago Dei, we should expect that Jesus would satisfy that description. In a most beautiful and transcendent way, this is exactly what he does. He refuses to be who he is as the quintessential image of God without us. Indeed, the purpose of the incarnation is that Christ may have for himself an eternal bride, his holy church. In his act of unparalleled condescension and self-giving, God the Son became incarnate, joining himself to us, so that through his birth and baptism, through his faithful and obedient life, and through his death, burial, resurrection, and ascension, we might belong to him as his beloved. By the Spirit, he births us anew, baptizing us into his death and resurrection, justifying and sanctifying us, so that we may be one flesh and one body with
him forever. In the beginning, Adam and Eve were united together as one flesh, the profound mystery of God’s creative purpose begun. In the new beginning, Christ and his bride are united together as one flesh, the profound mystery of God’s creative purpose fulfilled:

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. “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. (Eph. 5:29–32)

Right at the beginning of creation, God implicated the male and female in a mystery, that of the two becoming one. It was a beautiful and blessed mystery, no doubt full of rejoicing and wonder as the two came to experience each other, and thus life, as God intended it. And yet, as Paul tells us, this profound mystery was not self-defining, for it was a mystery that ultimately anticipated another. When God created humankind male and female in his image and joined them together as one flesh, he involved humanity in a mystery-sign, the fulfillment and reality of which awaited his incarnation. “The two shall become one flesh” is a mystery at the center of both creation and redemption, and Jesus Christ is the meaning of that mystery, because he is that mystery in himself. By assuming our flesh into union with himself—healing, sanctifying, and justifying our broken humanity in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension—we become one body and one flesh with him through Spirit-wrought faith. Thus, the mystery of creation is fulfilled in the mystery of redemption: the last Adam with and in his bride, and his bride with and in him.

Jesus Christ is the true image of God. However, he is not that image, any more than the first Adam was, as a solitary, independent being. Just as Adam would have been incomplete without Eve, Jesus would be incomplete without his bride. To echo the astounding pronouncement of Scripture, the church is none other than Christ’s body, “the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:23). The promise that the church is the “fullness of Christ” is so extravagant as to sound blasphemous. Is not Jesus Christ complete in and of himself? Is it really true, in Calvin’s words, that Christ “reckons himself in some measure imperfect” until he is joined to his bride? What sounds at first like blasphemy is, in light of the incarnation, the astounding promise that Jesus will not be who he is without us. In the extravagance of his self-giving
love, he has taken our humanity into union with himself so that, through his one act of atonement, we might be joined to him forever as his body and bride through the Spirit. In other words, the bridegroom “fills himself” with his bride; he becomes one flesh with his church in order to redeem, reconstitute, and re-create us as the *imago Dei*. In creation, Eve is the fullness of Adam, and together they are the image of God. In re-creation, the church is the fullness of Christ, and together they are the fulfillment of that image. In the incarnation of the Son of God, in the mystery of Jesus Christ, creation and salvation converge.

When God the Son became incarnate, he gave to marriage, and to the physical intimacy inherent to it, a meaning it could never have had on its own. This is true not merely because he upheld marriage as divinely ordained, but more importantly *because he fulfilled in himself the reality for which marriage is a sign*. The marital intimacy of the first human pair was a sign imbedded in their bodies of an intimacy to come, a marriage through which Christ would reconcile and re-unite sinners to God. The union between Adam and Eve was, we might say, the *proto-protoevangelium*—the very first glimpse of the gospel recorded in Scripture, Genesis 3:15 notwithstanding. “The two shall become one flesh” (Eph. 5:31; cf. Gen. 2:24) *refers to* the saving union between Christ and the church (Eph. 5:32). When God joined together the first male and female, he etched into creation a foretaste of a holy union to come, against which the gates of hell could never prevail.

This sacred marriage between Christ and the church possesses cosmic redemptive significance, for it is a blessed union that runs into eternity. God began creation with a marriage, he redeemed a fallen creation through a marriage, and he will finally consummate his unfathomable love for us in an everlasting marriage (Rev. 19:6–9). No one has expressed this as beautifully as Jonathan Edwards:

> The end of the creation of God was to provide a spouse for his Son Jesus Christ that might enjoy him and on whom he might pour forth his love. And the end of all things in providence are to make way for the exceeding expressions of Christ’s close and intimate union with, and high and glorious enjoyment of, him and to bring this to pass. And therefore the last thing and the issue of all things is the marriage of the Lamb. . . . The wedding feast is eternal; and the love and joys, the songs, entertainments and glories of the wedding never will be ended. It will be an everlasting wedding day.
In Jesus Christ, the marital union between male and female has been forever sanctified. Fulfilling that original creative sign in a truly majestic and transcendent way, he came to dwell with and in his bride, sharing with us who he is as the true image of God, giving new and eternal life to our flesh from his own. Regardless of how secular culture defines it, marriage, for the church, must be defined by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Marital intimacy is divinely intended to mirror the saving intimacy between God and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. Further, because the church is one with Christ, even as he is one with his Father through the Spirit, marriage is a sacred manifestation, on a creaturely level, of the intimacy between the triune persons of God. Accordingly, the one-flesh union between male and female necessarily transcends typically abstract moral, ethical, political, and social definition. Rather, marriage is to be understood primarily in light of God’s self-revelation in Christ, and so given christological and Trinitarian definition by the church. In so doing, we will delight and take courage in confessing that marriage is a sacred and beautiful sign given to us to reflect God’s ineffable love. In the union between Christ and the church, God has accomplished his redemptive and re-creative purposes, making us his beloved sons and daughters forever. In Jesus Christ, we find that God will stop at nothing to bring us into the life and love that he is. Indeed, he is willing to become what he was not—inarnate—and literally spend himself in suffering, misery, humiliation, and death to secure us as the objects of his eternal affection. As the recipient of God’s love, Christ’s bride comes to share in the triune family of God, forever enjoying the love that defines all love, the life that defines all life, and the personal intimacy that defines all personal intimacy. Let us heed Edwards again:

All sorts of people are fond of repeating the Christian statement that “God is love.” But they seem not to notice that the words “God is love” have no real meaning unless God contains at least two Persons. Love is something that one person has for another person. If God was a single person, then before the world was made, he was not love.24

—C. S. Lewis
Christ has brought it to pass, that those who the Father has given to him should be brought into the household of God, that he and his Father and they should be as it were one society, one family; that his people should be in a sort admitted into that society of the three persons in the Godhead. In this family or household God [is] the Father, Jesus Christ is his own naturally and eternally begotten Son. The saints, they also are children in the family; the church is the daughter of God, being the spouse of his Son. They all have communion in the same Spirit, the Holy Ghost.35

**MISIMAGING GOD AND OURSELVES**

When God created Adam and Eve, joining them in marital union, he established within our humanity a sacred sign of his love. The self-giving, life-giving personal intimacy and indwelling that exists in the union between male and female was intended to mirror what God is like. It was, furthermore, an anticipation of the gospel, the exceedingly good news that the incarnate Savior would become one flesh with his bride, the church, re-creating our humanity in his self-giving, life-giving “at-one-ment.” The union between male and female is thus given sacred definition in Scripture; it is to be interpreted in relation to the holy marriage first established by God at creation and quintessentially fulfilled in redemption.

Between these two great marriages, however, stands a great divorce. By the rupture introduced into creation through sin, the image of God suffered distortion and division; we became alienated from God, and therefore alienated from ourselves and from one another. The image of God was broken in us, and therefore broken between us. Broken images by definition badly reflect God, and we do so in seemingly innumerable ways, but none more serious than the ways we distort God and therefore ourselves in our fallen intimacies and longings. The ravages of sin were bound to penetrate deeply into what makes us human: “in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” And so they have. We were created by God to mirror his self-giving, self-denying, humanizing, procreative, unconditional, and indis-soluble love. Yet east of Eden, sadly, human love is all too characteristically selfish and self-gratifying, dehumanizing and objectifying, life-thwarting, conditional, and soluble. Sin has turned us inside out, as it were, leaving us curved in on ourselves. Disoriented by our self-orientation, we have become perversely proficient in unholy marital and sexual self-definition. Given the
holy gravity of human sexuality, the effects on our closest personal intimacies have been devastatingly weighty. After all, distortions and confusions of marriage and sex strike deep at what makes us human, distorting and confusing not only who we were made to be, but also how God images himself. For the holy bride of Jesus Christ, the implications are more severe still, for when we implicitly or explicitly condone or participate in unholy marital and sexual expressions, we obscure the very gospel we are privileged to share.

Because the stakes are so high, the distortions of which we speak demand theological assessment. This is to be distinguished from arrogant and self-protective finger-pointing, which might suggest that each of us, in various ways, was or is not subject to, or a purveyor of, the maladies we seek to assess. It is also to be distinguished from an assessment born of joyless negativity rather than deep appreciation and joyful wonder at the holiness of marriage and sex. But we must assess them theologically, for if our theology has nothing to say to us here, it ultimately has little to say at all. In what follows, we will briefly highlight several of the most important and far-reaching symptoms of our marital and sexual sickness, acutely aware that there is far more that could be said, and perhaps said far better. The intended goal, for the authors and readers alike, is the liberation and joy that comes from repentance in Christ Jesus, the embodied Lord of our sexual identity.

PUTTING ASUNDER WHAT GOD HAS JOINED TOGETHER

Marital union is a sign given to humanity that lends shape and substance to human love, for it images the indivisible, immutable love that God is. Divorce is thus also a sign, a countersign, that disfigures and disintegrates human love, implying as it does that God’s love is divisible and unstable. As that countersign, divorce signals a rupture in the most essential of human relations, the union between male and female. It is a sign embedded in the anti-creation, and it constitutes an attempt to do the impossible: put asunder what God has joined. In the new creation—the humanity of Jesus Christ—God has issued a resounding “No!” to this false sign, establishing, once again through marriage, an unbreakable sign of his indissoluble love. When Christ united himself in one flesh with his bride, he secured that union forever in himself, anchoring it in the eternal love of his Father through the Spirit. Because of his indefatigable and everlasting faithfulness, the church lives in the comfort and security that there is absolutely nothing that can divorce us from his love (Rom. 8:35–39). Christian marriage has the sacred privilege of
sharing in this sign of the new creation, the gospel, in which God overcomes our infidelities and divisions.

Understanding and rejoicing in the union between Christ and his church, we must ask ourselves very difficult questions, questions intended to lead us to the healing that can come only from our repentance in him. T. F. Torrance gives voice to these questions: “If Christian marriage is meant to reflect that union, how can the Church tolerate divorce? What would divorce mean but that Christ can and may cut off his Church, that he holds on to us only so far as we prove faithful? Where then would we fickle and faithless sinners be? . . . This must make us ask whether the current attitude to divorce in the Church is not evidence of something very wrong, in fact evidence of a serious weakness in its grasp of the Gospel.”

As difficult as such questions might be, can we ask any less if the mystery of marriage has indeed been fulfilled and reconstituted in Christ—that is, without ripping marriage from its proper context and moorings in the gospel? In so asking, we must not tread haphazardly and insensitively over the complexities that wither or break marriages under the pain of abuse or infidelity. Christ is, and will remain, an utterly faithful Savior despite our unfaithfulness. But we must ask these questions, just as surely as we must answer them, in the kind of humble and trusting repentance that shows that we have not grown cold toward our Bridegroom and his gospel.

JOINING TOGETHER WHAT GOD HAS PUT ASUNDER

It was not good for Adam to be alone. He needed Eve so that together they could be the *imago Dei*, and he needed Eve so that together they could foreshadow the life-giving union between Christ and his bride. But just as it was not good for Adam to be alone, neither was it good for Adam to be joined to another Adam, for two reasons. First, the image of God in humanity requires the male and the female: “in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” Just as surely as solitary Adam could not image God, neither could Adam multiplied by two. Male and female are personal distinctions within our common humanity that define humanity, whereas Father, Son, and Spirit are personal distinctions within the one God that define God; where God is concerned, union requires distinctions among persons. Second, two Adams, or a hundred more for that matter, could not fulfill the mandate that immediately followed their creation: “And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth’” (Gen. 1:28).
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Fruitfulness and multiplication require that humanity be the image of God: a life-giving, fruit-bearing union of distinguishable persons. How very much like God this is! The unity of the Father and Son in the Spirit is the life behind every life, the reason for the existence of everything and everyone (John 1:1–4; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2). Where God is concerned, the creation of life requires distinctions among persons.

If the fall is anti-creation, and necessarily includes distortion of the image of God in humanity, we might expect exactly what we find east of Eden: divisions and confusions among male and female—a dividing of what God has joined, as we have seen, but also a confusing of what God has distinguished. As lamentable as it surely is, we should not be altogether surprised when we read in Scripture that fallen images, who have “exchanged the truth about God for a lie,” are given to sexual confusion: “For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another” (Rom. 1:25–27). The fact that this passage occurs in the context of Paul’s teaching on idolatry is telling. The sexual manifestation of self-worship is the anomaly of same-gender sex—the attempt to unite ourselves with ourselves. If idolatry means that we are curved in on ourselves doxologically, it means that we may also be curved in on ourselves sexually. Holy worship and holy sexuality both require someone who is “Other” than us. Blocher writes:

Immediately we can understand why the Apostle Paul makes a close connection between idolatry and homosexuality (Rom. 1:22–27). This sexual perversion as a rejection of the other corresponds to idolatry in its relationship to God, the rejection of the Other; it is a divinization of the same, the creature.29

God sets himself against sexual idolatry, homosexuality, for ontological reasons, not political or moral reasons. As the Life of the world, he is implacably opposed to all creaturely forms of self-worship, sexual and otherwise, because idols are incapable of giving life. Confused worship, like confused sexuality, signals the death of humanity.

VIRTUAL SEX

The one-flesh union that God forged between his male and female image is the gift of personalization; the two come to experience their humanity in a
The Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Meaning of Marriage and Sex

uniquely intimate way in the joining of their persons. This is a gift that re-dounds to every human being, for each of us is a product of, and defined by, just such a union. Divorce and homoeroticism are two ways in which this gift is obscured, one an unholy separation of persons, the other an unholy confusion. Pornography is a third. Constituted by its objectification and thus dehumanizing of the other, pornography is the absurd attempt to make the gift of sexual union what it cannot be: impersonal. It is a case of sexual unreality, a voyeuristic endeavor to steal the pleasure of sexual intimacy from that which defines it. Pornography is an invitation to the contradiction of sexual autonomy. Counterfeits are sham substitutes, and pornography is no exception. It substitutes the holy images of God for impersonal images on a screen; self-giving love for self-involved lust; life-giving communion for life-sapping masturbation; and the beauty and fulfillment of personal union for the shame and regret of personal preoccupation.

Pornography promises sexual gratification, a promise impossible for it to deliver seeing that it is everything holy sexual union is not. It stands in stark contrast to holy intimacy precisely because it contradicts who God is, and who he is for us in Christ. God is, by definition, a communion of living persons who dwell with and in one another in self-giving, life-creating love—a love that always exists for the benefit of the other. By contrast, pornography is a stimulant to idolatrous intimacy, a self-preoccupied love devoid of the possibility of life, which seeks to exploit rather than give, deriving pleasure at another’s expense. The contrast is exacerbated when we consider the way in which God is for us in Jesus Christ. By becoming incarnate and suffering the abasement of our fallen humanity from cradle to grave, God the Son brings us, by the Spirit, to share in the living communion of life and love he has with his Father. In so doing, he re-creates, reimages, and authenticates our humanity in his own. Pornography is salvation’s polar and evil opposite. It is dehumanizing through and through, seeking selfish pleasure in the objectification and abasement of others. Whereas in salvation Jesus Christ personalizes us by joining us to himself, in pornography we depersonalize others whom we keep at a distance. Because pornography so thoroughly distorts the nature of sexual love, the results of such self-indulgence are devastating. Pornography, far from being a merely private affair, in fact functions as a demonically effective stimulant to every other sexual sin; it is a perverse gateway to a myriad of sexual adulterations and abuses, and wreaks havoc on holy marriages.
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ABORTION AND THE MEANING OF SEX

God blessed and sanctified birth when he created the first male and female in his image: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” This fruitful multiplying was intended as a reflection of God’s own life-giving interpersonal love. God resanctified birth forever in Jesus Christ when he was conceived in the womb of Mary by the Spirit, a conception through which our lifeless humanity would be given new birth in his. Conception and birth, no less than marriage and sex, are given their meaning in Christ. The life that proceeded from the union of Adam and his bride was a sign of the new and eternal life that would proceed from the last Adam and his bride—life and new life, procreation and re-creation, birth and rebirth. The life that comes forth from the union of male and female has a double reflection, mirroring both the procreative union of the persons of the Trinity and the procreative union of Christ and his church. The male and female union is pregnant with life, echoing who God is in his personal relations and what God does in the gospel of our salvation. In describing why human birth is so very precious to God, we must go even a trembling step further: the new birth we receive in Christ Jesus comes about because in the incarnation, God himself experiences conception and birth! The sanctification of birth has taken place in the incarnation of God.

The meaning of sexual union is thus tied inextricably to new life. Herein the ignominy of abortion becomes apparent: it means that the male and female have said “No!” to the meaning of their union at the point where God has issued a resounding “Yes!” Abortion is a total misconstrual and manipulation of the meaning of sexual intimacy. As such, debating about the inception of life, as important as that is, misses the larger and looming theological point: “Why do we kill approximately 4,000 unborn babies every day in the United States alone?” asks Christopher West. “Because we are misusing and abusing God’s great gift of sex. Make no mistake: in the final analysis, the abortion debate is not about when life begins. It is about the meaning of sex.” If fruit-bearing is a gift inherent to the blessing of sexual union, then the question of whether such life actually exists is nonsensical.

Common to all sexual and marital distortions—divorce, homoeroticism, pornography, and more—is the obscuring, refusal, or termination of life, possible or actual. In abortion, the “No!” to life is issued in such a way as to beget violent and bloody repercussions, leaving personal and relational devastation in its wake for all involved. Like all murder, abortion is an assault on God because it is an assault on his image. It takes place, as does all hatred for God,
in the shadow of Golgotha, where our contempt was exposed to its depths: nothing would satisfy our rebellion save the bloody termination—shall we say abortion?—of God’s true image, his one and only begotten Son. God experiences birth, but he also experiences its violent end.

In this violent end, the incarnate God suffers his own judgment on our sinful distortions, distortions that run deep into our being—all the way down to our naked bodies and the deepest personal intimacies that require them. In the midst of our marital and sexual sin, in our nakedness and shame, in the throes of the relational devastations we wreak upon ourselves and one another, God does the unthinkable. In Jesus Christ, God hangs battered, bruised, and bloody on a cross, naked and ashamed, the supreme demonstration that his love knows no bounds. There is no condition of ours, however humiliating and shameful, that God will not suffer to bring us forgiveness, healing, and peace. When we are included in Jesus Christ, we are put to death in his death, the death of our fallen humanity, the death of our broken marital and sexual self-definitions. And just as the Father raised the corpse of his Son from the dead by the Spirit, so we are raised in his resurrection, liberated from death and brokenness to share in his holy life.

The crucified, resurrected body of Jesus Christ is the judgment and salvation of our broken bodies. Jesus is the Lord over our twisted marital and sexual falsifications, but always as our merciful Savior. He alone is atonement and healing for our divided, confused, objectified, and aborted relations. The nakedness, humiliation, shame, torture, death, and burial that God in Christ suffers has as its end the glorious union between the resurrected Christ and his church. The everlasting, indissoluble, humanizing, and life-giving communion he establishes with his bride is the beginning of the re-creation of humanity in his image. In Christ, the church is re-established and re-oriented as male and female in the image of God, given freedom in repentance and forgiveness to experience marital and sexual holiness. In the mystery of Christ and his church, one flesh forevermore, marriage and sex become holy signs redeemed and fulfilled. Male and female God has created us, Christ and bride he has re-created us. We would do well to put this to prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, as you freely give yourself to your bride the Church, grant that the mystery of the union of man and woman in marriage may reveal to the world the self-giving love which you have for your Church; and to you with the Father and the Holy Spirit be glory and honor, now and forever. Amen.
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Commitment and intimacy work together. It is within the framework of commitment that security, vulnerability, and freedom flourish; it is unwaiving lifetime commitment that creates a context in which relational intimacy and passion thrive.

Has the value of commitment eroded in American culture? If so, what happened? The sexual revolution of the 1960s is one contributing factor. By the late 1970s, Americans had learned to see the world through the lens of radical individualism and freedom of choice. The most rewarding life, according to this mindset, is described as one untethered from stable commitments that would limit individual freedom of expression.

Unbridled individual freedom may seem ideal or desirable, but in actuality it leads to alienation in personal relationships and fragmentation in society.

A move away from long-term commitment has invaded almost every area of life in our current society. The average employee tenure is only 4.2 years and the average person has 12–15 job changes in their career.\(^1\) Meaningful local church involvement is in decline,\(^2\) and a lower percentage of people are getting married than ever, while sex is becoming less and less sacred.\(^3\) It is no wonder then that marriage itself is suffering and that divorce is tragically common.

The correlation between commitment and intimacy is confirmed throughout the Bible, in both human relationships as well as in our relationship to God. Social scientists also tell us that there is a clear connection between commitment and relational bonding and attachment.\(^4\) (Attachment will be
covered more fully in chapter 11.) Mutual trust, grounded in a lifetime commitment, gives birth to true joy and the ability to give oneself to another without reservation.

TRUST IN MARRIAGE BEGINS WITH TRUST IN GOD’S PROMISES

Our ability to trust the one to whom we are married begins with our ability to trust the One who invented marriage. Our willingness to be naked and unashamed before our spouse begins with our willingness to be naked and unashamed before our Creator. Every married person is a frail and fallen individual; even those who, as believers, are new creations in Christ grapple with the old nature. The only way to be sure we will not waver in our commitment is to cast ourselves into the strong enabling arms of God, whose promises are always kept.

God’s promises began in the garden with Adam and Eve, when He told them He would solve the horrific problem—loss of fellowship with a holy God—their failure to obey in the garden caused, and He set His plan in motion to redeem what had been tragically lost. And even when mankind’s wickedness was such that “the Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth” (Gen. 6:6 esv),\(^5\) God promised Noah that He would continue His saving work through saving him and his family (Gen. 9:9–16).

Later, God told Abraham that He would bless him and make him a great nation that would be a blessing to all the nations of the earth (Gen. 12:2–3); and He kept His promise and provided a son for Abraham even in his old age (Gen. 13:2–4; 17:1–7). Fourteen generations after Abraham, David was assured that his own descendants would bring about the Messiah and that even his sin would not keep God from staying true to His covenant (1 Sam. 7:1–17).

As we know, this Messiah did come, and in Christ we have the fulfillment of all God’s gracious commitments. “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory” (2 Cor. 1:20). It is because God is supremely faithful that we can rest in His gracious provision to enable us to keep the vows we make in His presence when we say “I do.” Because He gave us His Son, we should never doubt that He will enable us to remain faithful, even in the toughest of marriages. “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32).
REAL LOVE INVOLVES DAILY SACRIFICE

A mature person knows that true love is not defined by mere sentimentality or fleeting passions. Real love often involves real sacrifice. Jesus’ love for His bride, the church, cost Him His life, and true followers of Christ are willing to sacrifice daily for those they love. Going even further, Jesus said that there is no greater love than love that is willing to die for another (John 15:13).

Although few reading this book will be called to literally die for their spouse, we are called to die to self in countless ways so that the love in our marriages points to the love that Christ has for His church. When we live in Him, we learn to love like Him.

The daily self-sacrifice in marriage is not so dramatic as, for example, that of a soldier or firefighter who may be called on to lay down his life for another, but it is no less heroic. Our culture desperately needs to see examples of Christlike love in Christian marriages. No calling is greater for the married Christian than to be faithful and die to self for the good of his or her spouse.

This discipleship is lived daily and is centered on trust in Christ, determination to be like Him, and following in His steps wherever He leads. Without discipline and obedience, true discipleship does not exist, and neither does Christian love.

As long as I can remember, I’ve avoided using the term “fall in love.” Even when I was young, it seemed to me that using a verb like “fall” to describe entering into something so profound as a loving relationship trivialized what love really is, especially when referring to love in marriage. If you think about it, most of the terms we use to describe being in love tend to devalue the serious volitional commitment involved in a loving relationship. We say that we are “lovesick,” or “head over heels,” or “crazy about” the one we love. We even go so far as to compare being in love to being intoxicated or smitten.

Describing love in these terms implies that when we are in love, forces outside our control have overtaken us. The natural response to this inclination is, as we’ve mentioned, a lack of willingness to make serious commitments. One example of this is that cohabitation continues to increase worldwide and continues to undermine stability in marriage, parenting, and society. Another is that couples are marrying later than any other time in human history, and even the traditional marriage vow of “forsaking all others” may be replaced by something less final as often happens today.

Keeping one’s options open is more prevalent than ever. A radical validation of one’s immediate subjective experience as determinative of right
and wrong has made personal preference, comfort, and convenience the great idols of our day. Ideals such as fidelity, commitment, and exclusive devotion, even in marriage, seem passé and oppressive. In addition to these troubling trends, the overly sentimental, romanticized conceptions of love and marriage portrayed in romantic comedies and love songs lead many to have unrealistic expectations that invariably end in bitter disappointment when the reality of daily difficulties and challenges comes. Thankfully, we need not be limited to these false views of love, because God has, in His Word, given us His perspective on what actually comprises love and marriage.

THE TRIANGULAR LOVE OF GOD

Contrary to the commitment-phobic and shallow ideas about love and marriage, the Bible offers a profoundly challenging and meaningful alternative. At the heart of the biblical idea of love is a controlled determination to faithfully and selflessly devote oneself to another, and to relentlessly seek his or her good. The ultimate model for this kind of love is God Himself, who calls Himself the Husband of His people and who loves His bride with extravagant, wise, compassionate, holy love. This kind of love becomes the foundation of all true love. This does not mean true love lacks passion or relational intimacy but that these are anchored by an enduring covenant commitment.

Psychologist Robert Sternberg’s triangular theory of love is helpful at this point. While at Yale University, Sternberg studied interpersonal relationships and determined that “consummate love” requires three components: intimacy, passion, and commitment.9 Sternberg says that “The amount of love one experiences depends on the absolute strength of these three components, and the type of love one experiences depends on their strengths relative to each other.”10 Intimacy is the feeling of closeness or attachment. Passion consists of feelings of enthusiasm or excitement and often involves a strong physical and emotional dynamic. Commitment is a conscious decision to remain devoted to someone. Intimacy without passion or commitment is only fleeting. Passion without intimacy or commitment is merely infatuation. Commitment without intimacy or passion is “empty love.”

When we consider the full picture of God’s love in the Bible, it becomes clear that His is a consummate love with perfect intimacy, passion, and commitment.
Intimacy

God’s love creates interpersonal intimacy with those He loves. This intimacy has been experienced for all eternity among the persons of the Trinity. Jesus gives a couple of stunning glimpses of their intimacy in His High Priestly Prayer: “And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed” (John 17:5) and “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24). Within the relations among Father, Son, and Spirit, there has always existed perfect mutual love and glorification.

Through union with Christ by faith in Him, believers are invited into fellowship with Father, Son, and Spirit. “I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:26). The benefits of being found in the Son are astounding. By the indwelling presence of Christ through the Spirit, and because we are now co-heirs with the Son, we are now “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4) and welcomed into intimate fellowship with the Father, Son, and Spirit. Because the Father delights in the Son, He now fully delights in those who are identified with him.

Passion

God’s love is passionate in that it flows from the depths of His emotional life. The complexity and depth of our emotions is one of the main ways we see a beautiful manifestation of the image of God in human beings, the pinnacle of His creation. Repeatedly throughout the Bible, we see God as perfectly holy and also as expressing a full range of emotions from grief (Eph. 4:30), to joy (Zeph. 3:17), to intense anger (Ex. 4:14), to love (Eph. 2:4). When God speaks of His inability to abandon His rebellious people, He says it is because of His passionate love for them. Describing His pursuing, forgiving love God says, “My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender” (Hos. 11:8b). God undoubtedly feels deep passion for His covenant people.

Commitment

In addition to passion and intimacy, God’s love is anchored in His unwavering covenant commitment. His love is fully trustworthy because, out of His sovereign freedom, God has chosen to wed Himself to a people whom He loves with a never-changing devotion. God’s covenant commitment to His
people is grounded in His deep covenant love and faithfulness (hessed), which is to be mirrored in human marriage. When there is unwavering exclusive devotion in marriage, it creates security, safety, and a lifelong perspective to nurture profound intimacy. This reality calls for the strengthening of exclusivity and lifelong fidelity in marriage as mandatory for understanding marriage from a biblical perspective.

To understand the lifelong exclusive commitment that biblical marriage demands, we must first understand that human marriage is not an end in itself. It is intended to point beyond itself to the faithful love of God and to the kind of relationship He has with His people. Marriage is intended to display the glory of God’s undying commitment to His people. This is why God hates infidelity, divorce, and even idolatry of any kind. When we understand God’s jealousy for the faithfulness of His people to be devoted wholeheartedly to Him, we will grow in our devotion to Him and to the one we’ve committed to in marriage.

THE RIGHTEOUS JEALOUSY OF GOD

It is right and good for us that God is a jealous God. When we understand that God’s jealous love has intimacy, passion, and commitment, we will be able to rest in that love because we know how committed God is to maintain it. We will also have the understanding necessary in our marriages to love the way He does. Like God, we too should value faithfulness and abhor infidelity.

Repeatedly, throughout the Bible, God reminds His people that He is a jealous God. His jealousy is for His own honor, as well as for the faithfulness of those with whom He has established a covenant relationship. Any violation of the exclusive favor in this relationship is met with God’s strong emotional response of jealousy, which results in wrathful and—important to include—restorative action.

The jealousy of God is vital to the essence of His moral character, the impetus for worship and confidence on the part of His people, and a ground for fear on the part of His enemies. Godly jealousy is always a relational emotion in which the one who is jealous desires exclusive favor in the relationship.

At its core, jealousy is an emotion based in perceived infidelity to covenant exclusivity. This desire to remain exclusively favored in covenant relationship grows out of the recognition of the righteousness of fidelity. It is also based in the passion for the pleasure fidelity produces. Faithfulness then is never merely a cold commitment, but it is driven by a desire to find the joy, passion, and satisfaction that faithfulness produces.
We also see from biblical accounts that humans demonstrate godly jealousy in relationship to other persons and on behalf of God. Human jealousy is seldom uncontaminated with sin, can be unwarranted, and can be taken to ungodly extremes. Nevertheless, there is an important place in the Bible for human jealousy that is righteous and godly.

**Description of godly jealousy**

The concept of jealousy is present in Scripture in some instances without using the word. However, the Greek and Hebrew words that may be translated “jealousy,” are nevertheless vital to a proper understanding of the biblical teaching on this concept. Most biblical reference sources provide good general definitions of jealousy and acknowledge the possibility of a positive sense for it. The Hebrew and Greek words qināh and zēlos, which may be translated “jealousy,” have similar, yet a broad range of meanings. In addition to “jealousy,” other possible translations are “zeal,” “envy,” “ardor,” or “emulation.”

Jealousy expresses the unique character of the covenant relationship between Yahweh and His people. Because of the negative connotations associated with the word “jealousy,” it is vital to work with an accurate definition of the English word in its biblical context.

We’ll define jealousy as the ardent desire to maintain exclusive devotion within a relationship in the face of a challenge to that exclusive devotion. Necessary requirements for jealousy to be present are: a lover, a beloved, a rival, infidelity expressed in some way by the beloved, and an emotional response to that infidelity.

**GOD’S JEALOUSY FOR THE FAITHFULNESS OF HIS PEOPLE**

**The first commandment**

God’s ardent interest in His own glory and honor is a part of His eternal nature. The primary way God is glorified in all of creation is through the faithfulness of His people with whom He has established a covenant relationship. When His people are unfaithful, He reacts—as a righteous expression of His holiness—with jealousy.

God’s demand of exclusive faithfulness is most clearly seen in passages like Exodus 20:3–5:
You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me. (emphasis added)

The Ten Commandments are of primary importance because of the theological grounding they provide for the faith and life of Israel. The first commandment establishes the exclusivity of God as the object of His people's worship. “Every form of substitution, neglect, or contempt, both public and private for the worship of God is rejected in this commandment.” Yahweh desires to be the ultimate object of the affection of His people. While God's jealousy incites Him to wrath and is ultimately about the preservation of His glory, divine jealousy is a loving concept. “He himself wants to be the object of the worship and service of the Israelites, and he wants to make himself an image (cf. e.g., the image of the Lord as Israel's Husband in the prophets, e.g., Jer. 2:2; Hos. 1–3).” In this way God's jealousy “coincides with his love.”

Marriage as a metaphor

The marriage metaphor that describes God's relationship with His people in Scripture is central to understanding God's jealous love. This marriage imagery at the heart of the covenant is the reason biblical writers see idolatry of any kind as spiritual adultery, so the sexual imagery that accompanies this metaphor intensifies the jealous denunciation of spiritual adultery. The harlotry of God's people is graphically portrayed in the Bible.

That God compares His relationship with His people to a marriage should engender a great appreciation for how completely He has entered into time, space, and human relationship. When we consider that God is entirely self-sufficient and independent, it is staggering that He has, nevertheless, chosen to enter into an intimate relationship with His people to the point that He is moved to intense, jealous love when they spurn Him. We can understand why Augustine would in wonder ask God how this could be so. “What am I to you, that you should command me to love you and, if I do not, you should be angry with me and threaten great miseries?”

The marriage metaphor used to describe the covenant and the sexual imagery used to describe infidelity, provide the foundation for the sacredness of marriage and sex. In addition to invoking an appreciation for the depth of
God’s love for His people, it should also instill a deep reverence and respect for human marriage and sexual relations. Because these gifts from God illustrate the spiritual relationship God has with His people, they should not be trivialized or perverted in any way.

**Reaffirmation after unfaithfulness**

After His people rebel and worship a golden calf at Mount Sinai—and despite their infidelity—God reaffirms His faithfulness to His covenant. The core aspect of this obedience is once again expressed in the violent rejection of idolatry:

> Take care, lest you made a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim.

(Ex. 34:12–13)

In reestablishing the covenant, Yahweh grounds it once again in uncompromising devotion to Him. The reason given for this reiteration of the first and second commandments is the same as in chapter 20—divine jealousy. “For you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God” (Ex. 34:14). This justification for God’s exclusive demand expands on the jealousy found in the first and second commandments of Exodus 20 by deepening God’s self-description. Not only is He jealous, but His jealousy is such a significant part of His character that His “name is Jealous.” For God to say that His name is Jealous makes jealousy a central and primary characteristic of His being and actions.22

**Infidelity as a metaphor**

Another important biblical emphasis in the Bible to add to our understanding of God’s jealousy is how He uses metaphors of sexual infidelity. God compares Israel’s disobedience to the first and second commandments to an unfaithful, sexually promiscuous wife. He says that they must destroy the altars, sacred pillars, and Asherim or else they “might make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land and they would play the harlot with their gods” (Ex. 34:15 NASB).

This concern for covenant fidelity extends to future generations as well: “and you might take some of his daughters for your sons, and his daughters might play the harlot with their gods and cause your sons also to play the harlot with their gods (v. 16 NASB).” The marriage and sexual imagery used
here is a central emphasis within the divine jealousy theme. As said earlier, idolatry within the covenant context is the equivalent of spiritual adultery. Like any good husband who truly loves his wife, God expects absolute fidelity and reacts with anger in its absence. But divine jealousy is also a source of assurance and faith for those in devoted covenant relationship with Him. John Piper writes,

It is a horrifying thing to use your God-given life to commit adultery against the Almighty. Since God is infinitely jealous for the honor of his name, anything and anybody who threatens the good of his faithful wife will be opposed with divine omnipotence. God’s jealousy is a great threat to those who play the harlot and sell their heart to the world and make a cuckold out of God. But his jealousy is a great comfort to those who keep their covenant vows and become strangers and exiles in the world.

Yahweh has the right to exclusive favor simply because He is God, and He specifically demands it from those with whom He has established His covenant relationship. This covenantal relationship with His people is as a marriage, and any violation of it is cause for a jealous reaction.

**His pursuit of the beloved**

While God’s jealousy is foundational for His wrath and indignation, it also motivates His relentless pursuit of His loved ones when they go astray. “It is our confidence that the divine Lover will win His bride.”

God’s jealousy is the very real response He has to the infidelity of His people and the primary motive for His wrath and harsh judgment. But it is also the emotion and motive behind His inability to allow His wayward loved one to stray from His side forever. His jealousy is the catalyst for the process that ensures the restored relationship with His people and the great blessings they receive as a result of that restoration. There is a profound relationship between jealousy and love. Because of His great love for His beloved, Yahweh will bring judgment on her from her lovers; His angry jealousy will be satisfied and He will restore her and bless her. His jealous love will ensure that she fulfills her covenant role.

The depth of His love for His people will not allow for ambivalence when they are unfaithful. Because the marriage metaphor is at the foundation of God’s covenant, jealousy is the natural and expected response of the spurned husband. Therefore, “instead of treating qin’ā (jealousy) cynically, one should
hear in the word the legitimate, nay amazing, passion of God for one whom he loves.”

The jealous love of God ensures the fulfillment of the covenant promises and restoration of His people. It is this same jealous love of a husband that Isaiah speaks of that will bring the return from exile.

For your Maker is your husband. . . . In overflowing anger for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,” says the Lord your Redeemer” . . . “For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,” says the Lord, who has compassion on you. (Isa. 54:5, 8, 10 NASB, emphasis added)

It is this same love that Jeremiah speaks of as God promises his covenant faithfulness.

“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband,” declares the Lord. (Jer. 31:31–32)

And in this same love Hosea bases his assurance that the people of God will remain His people.

“I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the Lord.” (Hos. 2:19–20, emphasis added)

The other side of God’s jealous love is His compassionate undying commitment to His covenant promises. Israel was to remember that, “the intensity of his wrath at threats to this relationship is directly proportional to the depth of his love.”

While Israel may have dreaded the anger of God’s jealousy, the prophets always reminded her that this same jealousy ensured that her rebellious heart would not triumph. The sovereign jealous love of her faithful divine husband would.
GODLY JEALOUSY FOR THE CHURCH

A powerful example of godly jealousy from the New Testament comes from Paul’s ministry to the church at Corinth.

I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough. (2 Cor. 11:1–4, emphasis added)

Paul recognized that the Corinthians were flirting with a different gospel and a different spirit than the true one. Their devotion and loyalty to the true Christ was in peril. Their failure to spurn the false teachers in Corinth was adding up to idolatry. Paul knew that to follow after another gospel was to be unfaithful to the one to whom they had been betrothed.

Paul’s goal in his boasting, and in his ministry among the believers as a whole, was to bring about a “sincere and pure devotion to Christ” (v. 3). Paul uses this imagery of devotion and chastity to speak of the “wholeness and purity which is toward Christ” that he jealously wanted for his flock in Corinth. Prompting Paul’s jealousy for Corinthian fidelity was his fear, based on disturbing evidence (v. 4), that their minds and affections might be corrupted so that they would lose their single-minded faithfulness to Christ.

This jealousy Paul experienced was grounded in the marriage metaphor used to describe God’s relationship with His people. The theme of God as a husband to His people is prevalent in the Old Testament, as we’ve seen (esp. Isa. 54:5–6, 62:5; Jer. 3:1; Ezek. 16:8; Hos. 2:19–20), and that image intensifies and is more clearly defined in the New Testament, as the church is called the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:23–32; Rev. 19:7–9, 21:2, 9).

The marriage process of Paul’s day involved the betrothal, which established the commitment, and the nuptial, which consummated the marriage. The betrothal made the marriage legally binding even though the wife remained a virgin until the nuptial. Often a year would separate the two ceremonies, and the betrothal could only be broken by death or divorce.
fidelity to the marriage was broken for any other reason, it was considered adultery, and deserving the capital punishment of an adulterer (Lev. 20:10). The sober responsibility of preserving the bride’s chastity fell on the shoulders of her father (Gen. 29:23; Deut. 22:13–21). Paul’s use of the marriage metaphor shows “the closeness of intimacy and inviolability of the union of the Christian with his Saviour.” It also strongly emphasizes the lordship of Christ over the church.

Paul saw himself as a responsible father in the lives of the Corinthian believers. Because his ministry was responsible for their conversions, “Paul sees himself as the agent of God through whom his converts were betrothed to Christ.” “I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ” (2 Cor. 11:2b).

That Paul’s jealousy arose from the feelings of a responsible and loving father gives us a beautiful example of intense jealousy, combined with a tender pastoral concern. His pastoral concern tempered and informed his angry indignation and jealousy. In addition to his ability for hard rebuke, the Corinthians knew he also had deep love for his people: “Apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:28). Paul’s boasting did not come from pride or spite, but from fatherly concern for the good of his children. “Paul’s God-filled heart yearns to protect them and keep them for the ultimate human experience, viz. union with Christ alone.”

Paul desired to be able to “present” the Corinthian believers to Christ without their devotion lacking in any way. The betrothal obviously refers to the conversion of the Corinthians, and their nuptial as the return of Christ. Paul guards the church of Corinth with affectionate jealousy—not self-regarding but divine—lest anything should rob her of her chastity between betrothal and the day of presentation.

Paul is aware that the intervening time between betrothal of conversion and the nuptial of the second coming of Christ presents perilous challenges to fidelity. He wants the Corinthians to remain chaste for Christ until the wedding day of His return. But for now, the temptations continue and costly decisions must be made by those who claim the betrothal, for the jealous love of God calls the bride to keep herself chaste for her coming bridegroom.

The betrothal of conversion brings about an exclusive relationship between God and His people. She, the church, has only one husband and Paul emphasized this exclusivity of the church’s relationship with Christ with the “one husband” imagery of verse 2. Christ is the Bridegroom of all: the church universal
MARRIAGE

(Eph. 5:25–33), the local church, and the individual Christian. The believer is united to Christ as a wife to a husband (1 Cor. 6:15–17). Therefore, to love or be devoted to anyone except the true Christ is to break the marriage vow.

The Christians in Corinth can no longer claim independence or autonomy. They belong to Christ now (1 Cor. 3:23). He is their one Husband, and in anticipation of the coming of the Bridegroom they are under obligation to preserve unsullied their virginity (cf. 1 John 3:3); and Paul, their father in the gospel, jealously desires to present them as a pure and faithful bride to Christ on that great day. To break this marriage vow through a relationship with anyone except the true Groom, is viewed by Paul as losing one’s spiritual virginity. A pure bride is primarily a symbol of pure doctrine, which then leads to holy living, and this pure doctrine is the essence of maintaining pure devotion to Christ.

Paul’s assumption that the Corinthians have pure virginal status before God is an amazing testimony to the power of the gospel. Those who had previously been sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, practitioners of homosexuality, thieves, greedy, drunkards, revilers, and swindlers (1 Cor. 6:9–11) now stand as pure brides before God. The gospel’s power to justify and sanctify the believer (1 Cor. 6:11) is what Paul jealousy seeks to preserve in the lives of the Corinthians.

Paul’s divine jealousy burns for the perfect union of Christ with His bride. The passage in 2 Corinthians 11 intimates His deity and ultimacy, for it is because of Christ that the covenanted people are to be preserved faithful. Paul’s godly jealousy for the Corinthians is based in the same deep covenant love that God feels for His people.

As the Corinthians’ devotion to the true Jesus decreased as shown in their increasing sinful behavior, Paul’s jealousy for their devotion increased. “For those souls are jealous which burn ardently for those they love, and jealousy can in no other way be begotten than out of a vehement affection.”

No love of the natural heart is safe unless the human heart has been satisfied by God first. The tragedies of human lives can only be solved by an understanding of the one great fundamental truth that Jesus Christ alone can satisfy the last aching abyss of the human heart.

—Oswald Chambers

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Although divine love is fully operative in this jealousy, and the well-being of the Corinthians is in sight, God’s glory is also a motivator for Paul. The welfare of His people is a driving motivation for Paul, but his jealousy is also like God’s in that the honor of God’s name always remained his ultimate goal.

Paul’s jealousy must also be considered within the tender pastoral heart that he had for his people. When he rebuked them for their unfaithfulness, it was done so in the context of the holistic loving ministry he had with them. It is safe to say that for Paul the primary focus of shepherding people was in the realm of truth. He realized that the most important way to love his people was to help them to know and live the truth. However, Paul balanced this hard passion for truth with the compassionate heart of a pastor. Paul is jealous for God’s glory and the fidelity of His people, but he also has a deep love and affection for His people (Rom. 9:2–3; 1 Thess. 2:7; 1 Tim. 5:23; Philem. 1:7). He did not express his jealousy with self-righteous detachment, but as a loving father.

Unfaithfulness to God, according to Paul, was to believe in anything but the true gospel and the true Christ. Like the Old Testament prophets, Paul understood the marriage metaphor to be at the core of the covenant and the gospel, and therefore recognized any compromise of the gospel to be spiritual adultery. Religious pluralism was not an option for Paul.

He not only recognized the idolatrous implications of false belief, he also saw the fundamental connection between God’s honor and obedience to Him. A Christian who lived as a friend of the world was an enemy of God. This unfaithfulness brought about an intense jealousy from Paul. Paul’s love for the people to whom he ministered, and his devotion to their apprehension of the true gospel, was grounded in his ultimate goal in everything he did: the glory of God (Rom. 15:7; 1 Cor. 10:31; 2 Cor. 1:20, 4:15; Phil. 2:11).

Because jealousy is such a central characteristic of God and godly people, it should be understood as an emotion that needs to be cultivated and felt by godly Christians. If the limitations and qualifications we have discussed are heeded, this emotion should be encouraged and appreciated in the church and in marriage. True love responds with deeply felt jealousy whenever one in covenant relationship expresses infidelity.

God will allow no rival to Him in the lives of his people, and godly men and women will share in this jealousy for the faithfulness of His people, and ultimately, for God’s eternal glory.
Loving our spouse starts with loving God

Love and faithfulness to Christ is fundamentally expressed in obeying Him. Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15), and loving others is the main way we keep His commandments.

Love for others is meaningless if it is not found in our closest relationships. For married followers of Christ, the starting point of love for others needs to be with the one with whom we are one flesh. Christlike, Holy Spirit–enabled, gospel-empowered love for our spouse needs to be at the top of our list of priorities as we seek to be faithful to Christ.

Dave, a dear friend of mine, had a counseling practice in which he primarily worked with Christian married couples who were having major relational conflict. One of the most disconcerting things he often experienced generally took place in the initial session. Dave would ask the two how things were going, which would open up a bevy of complaints from both the husband and wife, frequently expressed with vindictiveness, spite, and sinful anger. After listening to the couple trash each other for a while, Dave would typically turn to the husband and ask him how his relationship with the Lord was going in the midst of all this marital strife. Dave was often amazed by how often the answer was something like “Oh, glad you asked, actually it’s never been better. Actually, all the struggles with her have really brought the Lord and me much closer.”

Our capacity for self-deception and duplicity can be staggering. What Dave would do at that point would sometimes cost him any further appointments with this couple. He would open his Bible and read 1 John 4:20: “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.” Dave would then close his Bible and have to inform the husband that “not only are you having marriage problems, you also have a lying problem. No matter how you may feel, your relationship with God cannot be in a good place if you are treating your spouse with disdain.”

Devotion and love to Christ must be expressed through devotion and love for those we are called to love, most especially the one with whom we are one flesh. Keeping our wedding vows for life honors Christ.

Jesus said, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of
me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 10:37–39). Even our greatest devotion on a human level should pale in comparison to our devotion for Christ. This does not diminish our love for others; it establishes it in Christ’s love for us (1 John 4:19), which is the foundation of our love for Him and everyone else.

What fidelity involves

When we think of faithfulness in marriage, we think of keeping the seventh commandment, which prohibits adultery. While we need to be vigilant in guarding against the attitudes, thoughts, and actions that lead to adultery, sins of omission deserve equal attention along with sins of commission.

Our faithfulness starts with being kind and unselfish in our decisions and actions, even in the mundane details of daily life. It is expressed in listening well, asking how we can serve our spouse better, praying for each other, and tending to our own souls so we can be generous with our time and attention. It means we strategize about how to be better servants and build one another up. When we habitually neglect any of these, whether from indifference or lack of awareness of our spouse’s needs, we eventually become guilty of sinning by omission.

As a pastor of a church with a lot of young adults, I have had the privilege of officiating many weddings. It is a great honor to stand before a congregation and an energetic, excited couple as they embark on a major new chapter of their lives. When we get to the point in the wedding vows when I hear them say “for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, as long as we both shall live,” I’m usually thinking something like, “Oh, dear young ones, you have no idea what you are getting yourselves into when you say that.” I know that usually they are thinking that keeping that vow will mean being patient and caring when the occasional stomach flu hits or when money is tight. But I know that it won’t be long before far greater challenges—both major life events and those more ordinary—will threaten their determination to be faithful. Then what? They will be tempted to take the easy way out—to pursue comfort, convenience, and independence. If they give in to those temptations, they may even have the gall to say something like “I feel a peace about leaving this hard marriage because I know God wants me to be happy.”

Thank God for His amazing grace and patience. We certainly need it. If any married couple is going to rise above the easy way out, they will need a compelling vision and purpose for their lives and marriage that transcend
shallow worldly values—and that depends on resources that only God can provide. That vision is a God-glorying life, and the source of strength is the power of the gospel through the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.

We think of missionaries who serve in areas resistant to the gospel as displaying heroic faithfulness, but heroic faithfulness also takes place quietly in homes where husbands and wives are staying faithful through the steady stream of daily challenges that come their way. God is honored whenever we are faithful to Him, even if He is the only one who knows.

A great example of faithfulness to God through fidelity to his spouse was Robertson McQuilkin. He and his wife, Muriel, had raised six children and served as missionaries in Japan for twelve years. Muriel, who taught at Columbia, began to suffer from Alzheimer’s disease. It got so bad that she was terrified whenever her husband was not nearby. He realized that he needed to resign from his job as president of Columbia International University, where he had served for twenty-two years, and also to step away from the many boards he served on and curtail his substantial writing and speaking ministry. From a practical standpoint, he was at the most influential and productive chapter of his ministry. Some of his friends encouraged him to place Muriel in a care facility—and in many situations, that indeed is the most loving act. But McQuilkin knew that the greatest way he could honor God would be to stay home and care for his wife. Here are some of his powerful words from his resignation speech:

“It is clear to me that Muriel needs me now, full-time. . . . My decision was made, in a way, forty-two years ago when I promised to care for Muriel ‘in sickness and in health . . . till death do us part.’ So, as a man of my word, integrity has something to do with it. But so does fairness. She has cared for me fully and sacrificially all these years; if I cared for her for the next forty years I would not be out of her debt. . . . Duty, however, can be grim and stoic. But there is more: I love Muriel. She is a delight to me—her childlike dependence and confidence in me, her warm love, occasional flashes of that wit I used to relish so, her happy spirit and tough resilience in the face of her continual distressing frustration. I don’t have to care for her. I get to! It is a high honor to care for so wonderful a person.”

Robertson McQuilkin’s example stands out as a model of Christlike, joyful, servant-hearted, love for God in the way he loved his wife.
This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. (John 15:12–13)

CONTINUING INSIGHT:

LOVING LIKE JESUS IN OUR MARRIAGE

by Darryl DelHousaye

In the simplest possible statement, the purpose of Scripture is to lead us to Jesus. Do not interpret that, however, as simply being born again. Deliverance from the penalty of sin is only the beginning of the salvation transformation Scripture aims to lead us into. We are expected to become like Jesus in every way as Scripture inculcates in us the very love of God, which in turn will lead us to love like Jesus (1 John 4:7–11).

With this context in mind, we can look at one of the best examples in the Bible of how human beings warp Scripture, and examine what Paul really said in those infamous verses about submission and obedience. He first speaks to wives:

Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. (Eph. 5:22–24 nasb)

These words are often isolated or misinterpreted, but nothing in this passage warrants forcing a wife into a subservient role. The Greek word for “be subject” is *hupotasso*. Its primary meaning is to arrange oneself or to order oneself in such a way that you are helpful to the team. It is a word used in military terms to refer to a formation of soldiers. *Hupotasso* meant to stay in your position in the formation so that everyone can support each other.

Two things should especially be noted in this passage. First, the word for submit, *hupotasso*, is the same word Paul uses in reference to the church being submitted to Christ. In Ephesians 5:24 (esv), he wrote, “As the church submits
to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.”

Second, the command for wives to be subject is in the middle voice. There are three voices in Greek grammar that describe the interaction of the subject of a sentence with the object.

Active voice means that the subject of the sentence performs the action, as in “I am talking.”

Passive voice means that the subject of the sentence is the object of the action, as in “I am being talked to.”

But when the middle voice is used, it means that the subject of the sentence is performing the action toward itself. “I am talking to myself” is an example of the middle voice.

In Ephesians, the middle voice means that the wife performs the action of being subject, not the husband. She performs the action in regard to herself, not to anyone else. In other words, she chooses to arrange herself in her relationship with her husband. She is not forced into that position by the actions of her husband. This certainly leaves no justification for abuse or control on the part of the husband.

A woman’s choice to support is consistent with the role of a wife as described at the creation of woman. Eve was to be a “helper suitable” for Adam, or literally, a helper corresponding to him (Gen. 2:18).

The word “helper,” in Hebrew, is ezer. It does not even imply subjection. The word is used thirteen times in the Old Testament to describe God as our helper. The Hebrew word is not used in the sense of a servant who helps, that is, the hired help. Not once in the Hebrew Bible does the word refer to a servant. Rather it connotes the kind of help that comes when you are in serious trouble and you shout, “Help!” Eve was created because Adam needed help badly. His helper was suitable for rescuing him from being without a suitable partner.

The word “suitable” in Genesis 2:18 is kenegado. It is a compound of three Hebrew words. The prefix is simply the Hebrew letter kof, or a “k” in English.

Between a man and his wife there is a far closer relation; for they not only are united by a resemblance of nature, but by the bond of marriage have become one. Whoever considers seriously the design of marriage cannot but love his wife. —John Calvin
It indicates a comparison, that is, it shows how “helper” compares to “him” or Adam.

The second part of the word is neged, which means opposite, counterpart, in the presence of, before, or over against.

The last part is vo, which refers to “him,” meaning Adam.

Taken together, this compound word implicitly asks the question, what is the comparison between helper and Adam? The answer is that the comparison is neged. Literally, Eve was made to be a helper who stood opposite or in front of Adam, facing him. It presents a picture of two equals working together to perform a task. For example, if they wanted to move a table, they would have difficulty picking it up if the wife stayed in a subservient role under or behind her husband. They are only effective when she stands on the other side of the table and lifts her half. They have to stand opposite each other on equal footing, facing each other and working together as equals. Remember that the initial command to the man and woman was to fill the earth with others who would bear the image of God (Gen. 1:27–28). Neither could do this alone.

What does this mean for our understanding of Ephesians 5:22–24? It means that when a wife is imitating God, acting in Christlike love, she will attempt to order herself into her husband’s life in such a way that she supports him and works in unison with him to accomplish the goals of the marriage. She will do this by her own choice, not because she is forced into subjection, but because that is what Christ would do.

HUSBANDS TO WIVES

The instructions to wives leave no room for the husband to impose on her right to make her own decisions. Paul gives clear direction that ensures he will have more than enough to do without worrying about how his wife acts.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. (Eph. 5:25–27)

Paul’s instructions to the wife imply a life of love, but he doesn’t take the chance that husbands will miss the importance of love. He begins with the
blatant command, “Husbands, love your wives.” There is no ambiguity here. Love is the only option.

Just to be sure, however, that husbands do not fail to grasp what this love means, he clarifies. No doubt men were just as self-serving then as we men are today. Paul’s description, however, does not leave any excuse for the types of definition that often are given.

- Love does not mean jealously isolating one’s wife under the pretense of protecting her.
- Love does not mean dictating decisions to her.
- Love does not mean forcing her to submit to a husband’s will.
- Love does not mean demanding sex just because the husband feels like it.

The list could go on, but the point is clear. Loving one’s wife is reflected in six characteristics that she will manifest when a husband is loving her biblically. She will be: sanctified, cleansed, spotless, without wrinkle, holy, and blameless. And all those things must be accomplished without dictating anything to her, since how she submits to her husband is her business, not his. For a husband to love his wife, he must act in a way that encourages her cooperation with him, not in a way that requires or coerces it.

What does it mean to be sanctified? The word itself is hagiazo, which is usually defined with terms like “set apart” or “consecrated.” It does mean that, but the word speaks to regard or reverence. In Ephesians 5:26, the verb form implies that a husband will consciously choose to regard his wife as holy. One does not abuse what is holy. One cares for it. Loving one’s wife means approaching her as a person would approach anyone of great worth—by exercising reverence and respect.

“Cleansed” is the word katharizo, and it means to clean by removing dirt. In this case, however, Paul specified the type of cleansing agent to be used—“the washing of water with the word.” By this time, we should be able to imagine what that looks like. If we understand the Scripture correctly, it will make us more like Christ and it will bring us life.

In other words, husbands love their wives by applying the principles of Scripture in a way that helps them become more like Christ, reaching the full measure of their potential in life. A wife who is fearful rather than joyful, timid rather than bold, sullen rather than outgoing, or cold rather than loving has not been washed very well with the Word. A husband who lives in love will seek to do all he can to see those godly qualities blossom in his wife.
The same can be said of the other characteristics that Paul states, “having no spot or wrinkle” and “holy and blameless.” The evidence that a husband is loving his wife well is that she grows into what God created her to be. Wives who are constantly trying to hide who they are have not been given the kind of environment in which they can be themselves. They are too ashamed of the flaws they perceive in themselves. Loving husbands bring encouragement and validation that takes away shame and replaces it with confidence.

_The man who loves most will love best. The man who thoroughly loves God and his neighbor is the only man who will love a woman ideally—who can love her with the love God thought of between them when He made male and female. The man, I repeat, who loves God with his very life, and his neighbor as Christ loves him, is the man who alone is capable of grand, perfect, glorious love to any woman._

—George MacDonald

**CONTINUING INSIGHT:**

**MARRIAGE AND MUSIC IN THE EARLY CHAPTERS OF GENESIS**

_by James F. Coakley_

There has always been a close relationship between romance, marriage, and music. Love has been associated with poetry and song for time immemorial. What may not be readily recognizable is that this relationship is even evident in the early chapters of Genesis. One of the ways to heighten a message’s content is to set it to music, so it should not be surprising that the greatest book of all time uses that tactic to foreground certain points. One practice
that astute Bible readers discover is that one must pay attention not only to the individual words of a text but to the overall shape of a passage.

Early on, the placement of poetry/songs in the Bible makes a statement. These poetic insets are placed at key points to add punch to what has been stated earlier in the text. This structural shape and pattern exist in the early chapters of Genesis on a microscale, but this shape is also used on the macroscale in the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch. That pattern is a narrative text followed by a poetic/musical interlude, which is then followed up by a brief epilogue. What is particularly interesting is how music and poetry, which are embedded in the text, help accentuate the main points of the narrative, serving as a peak, thematically speaking.

### Genesis 1–4 Micro Pattern

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Notice that the first poetic inset is found in Genesis 1:27 and extols in song-like verse that male and female both are made in the image of God. We have dignity because both genders reflect the image of God and we are the pinnacle of God’s creation activity! That is truly something to sing about and celebrate!

The next chapter looks at creation from a little different vantage point by focusing on humanity and its relationship to the world that God made. As a peak in this narrative, Adam joyfully exclaims in another poetic inset that the woman God made especially for him is now “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen. 2:23 niv). Marriage is the peak of Genesis 2 and it is evident by the invocation of poetry/song embedded within the narrative. However, the next chapter details the fall in the garden, and this time the poetic inset is in the form of a curse placed upon the serpent, the woman, and the man for their disobedience. For the man and woman, what should have been a blissful life is now sadly tinged with sin and curse. Interestingly, the curse on man and woman is connected to their point of origin. In a poetic wordplay man (Hebrew *adam*) who was made from the ground (Hebrew *adamah*) is now
going to experience friction with the stuff from which he is made. The ground will now be hard to work due to his disobedience. The woman, whose point of origin was from Adam’s side, is now going to experience tension with the one from whose rib she was fashioned. Woefully this change is cast in mournful poetic language to commemorate how sin has affected the relationship between husband and wife.

The next chapter contains some clear examples of the fact that sin has now drastically affected the family structure and marriage. Sibling rivalry led to fratricide when Cain killed Abel. At the end of the chapter in a poetic boast (Gen. 4:23), Lamech speaks to his two wives (another evidence of how quickly sin has infiltrated the institution of marriage). Gleefully, in what is known as synonymous parallelism—a literary form that is clearly evident later on in the poetic books of Psalms and Proverbs—Lamech sadly but melodiously states to his two wives Adah and Zillah:

Lamech said to his wives, “Adah and Zilla, listen to me. Wives of Lamech, hear my words. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times.”
Adah and Zillah,
Listen to my voice, You wives of Lamech,
Give heed to my speech,
For I have killed a man for wounding me;
And a boy for striking me.

Now it is interesting to see the progression of the poetic songlike insets embedded at the end of these first four chapters. The first song in almost hymnlike fashion extols the fact that both men and women are made in the image of God and heightens our majestic status on the earth. The second song, sung by Adam, extols in a love ballad the wonders and beauty of marriage and foregrounds that relationship as one of the greatest gifts that God has given to humanity in the garden of Eden. But then sin enters the world and even poetry is affected because now instead of love ballads extolling marriage, mankind is singing the blues due to disobedience.

But the downward trek continues even more deeply in the next chapter when Lamech is glorifying violence done to a fellow human being made in God’s image. So we go from a hymn, to a love ballad, to the blues, and ultimately to what sounds like heavy metal. Music not only foregrounds some of the thematic peaks in these early chapters of Genesis but also mirrors the sad effects of what devastation sin has brought into the world, especially as it relates to family and marriage.

It is to be hoped that the lessons in this book can begin to bring us back to where we are more Edenic in our marriages and in our songs. Marriage is the certainly a major theme early on the Bible and one worthy of celebrating in song!
Marriage has fallen on hard times. Not only has the public debated about what a marriage actually is, but many people are no longer “signing up” to enter into marriage. The distinct handling of the institution of marriage is part of a social revolution that stems from many factors: the invention of the Pill, greater openness to divorce, social and legal availability of abortion, changed social mores, the prevalence of cohabitation, children born to parents who are not married, and more. There is no shortage of data that corroborate what is evident: marriage is becoming less common in the United States, and the impact is not just personal, but societal.

It is no accident that the creation of man and woman in Genesis 1 and 2 is accompanied by the union of the man and woman and presented as one of the most significant of human relationships. Marriage is foundational, and is more than the two people in it—the institution functions as a key building block for society by, among other things, providing a stable home and environment for children. Marriage models cooperation across genders for those children and also for society at large.

Defining marriage in Scripture gives us a major window into a core human relationship and why Scripture presents the state of marriage as so central to human flourishing.
BEGINNINGS IN A GARDEN: HUMANS AND THEIR MISSION

In Genesis 1 two key terms need attention: image/likeness and subdue. One term tells who we are. The other tells us what we are to do.

What humans are

Early on, Scripture places marriage in high esteem. God’s forming of male and female humans is the high point of His creation, and in many ways, marriage is the capstone of the creation narrative. On the sixth day, God creates humans in His image as told in Genesis 1:26–31. “In our likeness” (Hebrew, demūth) in verse 26 is not so much a physical attribute, however, since an incorporeal God is in view contextually, but in terms of certain attributes of person and relating that also connect to a sense and awareness of presence. God can be present—and is—without being seen. Likewise humans, through our character can and do stamp our existence and leave an impression whether or not we are physically in a particular location. Then verse 27 makes three statements: (1) God created humans in His own image; (2) this creation was in the image of God; and (3) they were created male and female. The double mention of humankind being made in God’s image is clearly for emphasis in the text. No other creation of God is so closely associated with Him. In Genesis 1, the text has been building to this moment when God makes a mirror of Himself.

On this day, as God viewed His entire creation, which now included human beings, it is uniquely said of what He created that it was very good as opposed to the good of previous days.

What humans are to do

The creation commission and mandate God gives in verses 28–30 is given to both the man and the woman. Together they will carry out the calling God has given to humanity as the steward of creation, the instruction being to multiply, fill the earth, and subdue (radah) it, or bring it under control. Unlike other creatures, humans can rule and subdue by planning, discernment, and reflection, with an awareness of past and future. Man and woman are to accomplish this goal together. In effect, God has equipped people to be stewards of the creation. To manage the creation well is a core calling of life for each of us.

Genesis 2 zeroes in on the relationship of man and woman as originally designed before the fall. In verse 18 we see God recognizing that it was not
good for Adam to be alone. This led into a process of identification that also produced an awareness of a need that the creatures already present could not fill. The goal was an ezer k’negdo, the translation of which has been a topic of discussion, even debate. The ezer describes a quality God demonstrates in numerous texts (Ex. 18:4, by delivering; Deut. 33:7, helping Judah against his enemies; 33:26, 29, by protecting and delivering; Pss. 33:20, help and shield; 115:9–11, protector; 121:2, protector; 124:8, by deliverance; 146:5–6, as Jacob’s help).1 As God helps us, so the one corresponding to (k’negdo) Adam is to help.

Since every person is a part of the human race and human nature is something social and has in itself the power of friendship as a great good, God willed for this reason to create all humans from one person, so that they might be held fast in their society not only by likeness of descent, but also by the bond of relationship. Thus the first tie of natural human society is husband and wife. And yet God did not make each one separately and then join them as if they were strangers to each other. Rather, He created one from the other, yet He put a sign of their union’s power in the side, from which the woman was drawn forth and formed (Gen. 2:21-22). For they were joined to each other from the sides, they who walk side by side, they who together look where it is they walk.2 —Elizabeth Clark

The picture of this second word is of one who fits or complements Adam. It is a word both physical and relational, as the idea is that she is an opposite match.3 This one made to be like Adam, yet also distinct from him, is the match, the help. No such ezer existed for the man Adam until God created woman from the man. The result in 2:23–24 was a recognition and celebration that the counterpart had been found; indeed, the first time a person speaks in Scripture, it is Adam rejoicing in the bone of his bone and the flesh of his flesh, the one taken from him to be a team player with him. It is in this context that the text that defines marriage is presented as a pinnacle of creation, its concluding and climactic note. Genesis 2:24 (niv) reads, “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.”4
MARRIAGE

THE DISRUPTION TO GOD’S DESIGN

As we have determined, God defined marriage to Adam as the forming of a home with a counterpart who is called to be a help and support as a team member in stewarding His creation well. The celebration is of completion of the unity that comes as Eve joins Adam as one both different from and yet like him. They are to work in the creation as stewards together, each as a reflection of the image of God, forming a home unit where mutual support can be found.

Break in mutual support

The design for marriage faced a severe disruption with the fall of Adam and Eve into sin in Genesis 3. Due to their choice to disobey God—something Eve initiated (Gen. 3:1–7) but that Adam was held responsible for as the recipient of the original command (Gen. 2:16–17)—the original design of their relationship was disrupted.

The consequences of the disruption are soon evident. When God confronts Adam about his disobedience, the man is no longer celebrating Eve’s presence with him, but blames God for giving her to him, calling her “the woman you put here with me” (Gen. 3:12 NIV). When God confronted Eve, she blames the serpent for deceiving her. Neither of them takes responsibility for making a destructive choice, a choice they were free to make but that had consequences.

The entire sequence shows that freedom to choose does not necessarily mean freedom will be exercised wisely. In Genesis 3:16, the result is a battle and a rivalry between the man and woman in marriage. This text speaks of the husband dominating the wife. The Hebrew term here is mashal. It refers to a dominance in negative terms as part of a judgment oracle. The term can connote either a negative or positive tone depending on the context. For example, Genesis 37:8 involves a complaint by Joseph’s brothers about Joseph’s arrogant desire to control them, while Deuteronomy 15:6 is about Israel’s rule over nations seen as an expression of God blessing the nation. The judgment context here in Genesis 3 points to the more negative sense of mashal, as everything else in the oracle also has pain and difficulty tied to it. The unity of the original creation with its mutual support has become a rivalry about power.

Something very subtle is also present in how the fall is portrayed; it is only when the team fails that the consequences come. Adam and Eve failed each
other in their act of disobedience. Eve’s act leads Adam into a bad choice, but Adam failed as well in not responding in line with the command God had given directly to him. As a result, the pattern God had designed to bring stability and support in a family led to devastating results for the entire creation. So strategic was the design of marriage that its brokenness spills over into creation at large, disrupting the very stewardship humans were created to exercise.

**Non-monogamous marriage**

The brokenness, then, does not stop with this failed start, but has permeated into every culture throughout human history. For example, consider the surprising amount of polygamy one sees in the Old Testament. This is clearly illustrated in the way Abraham, as the husband in a barren marriage, sought to provide for a descendant through another child bearer outside of Sarai, his wife. These events are almost described as a matter of fact and seem to have been cultural givens, especially since the scheme was Sarai’s idea. However, though the activity was common, it is not an indication of the acceptability or advisability of such practices, nor did it imply God’s sanction on the custom.

One can say that the consistent portrayal of such activity in Scripture is decidedly negative. The result of Abraham’s effort to move outside of his marriage to provide for family descent through the slave Hagar led to intense jealousy and the emergence of a family line that yielded generational conflict. This is but the first of many such outcomes from an approach to life where multiple partners led to instability in the home and brought consequences of intense jealousy. The history of Solomon’s many wives (1 Kings 11) is a paradigm for this broken model of marriage. Not only did Solomon follow these wives into idolatry, but his disobedience and unwise decisions resulted in God’s choosing to divide the kingdom. The commandment not to covet another’s wife is rooted in the sacredness and uniqueness of the singular male-female relationship (Ex. 20:17).

**Faithful God and unfaithful people**

The image of a faithful God married to His people is a picture pointing in the same direction (Ezek. 16:8). In the book of Hosea, the counterportrait of Israel as a bride unfaithful to her husband, the God of Israel, shows the image again of the consequences and pain that come from unions pursued without loyalty. The protection and support marriage was designed to offer, when broken or ignored, damages all who experience it.

By the time we come to the New Testament, references to marriage include
the admonition to keep the marriage bed undefiled, which is a call to faithfulness in marriage (Heb. 13:4). From a mirror of the call of creation comes the importance of managing the household well, and a man who can do so as well as being the husband of only one wife becomes the example for selection of elders in the church (1 Tim. 3:1–5). Marriage is certainly not something to be forbidden, as some suggested; attempting to teach such a thing is seen as a departure from the faith (1 Tim. 4:1–4). Underlying these principles is the recognition that stable marriages lead to a more stable community, a healthy environment not only for children but for our neighbors and communities as well.

This is why divorce is so painful. It is the ripping up of something far more profound than a legal contract or social arrangement. It is the tearing apart of a relational fabric that had been sewn together into one flesh, now torn asunder with damage and fallout in all directions. The rupture of a marriage touches far more than the two people in it. No wonder marriage is lifted up in Scripture as a core relationship—it is because the institution of marriage does touch us relationally at our core. It prepares us for life in a world made up of men and women. It prepares us to steward well not just in terms of the things of life but with others relationally as well.

**God made man and woman. The first balance that was given was before sin entered into the relationship, a perfect balance of being one, spiritually, intellectually, and physically. All the imbalances have come as a result of sin upsetting the perfect balance. Anytime there is any “danger” (in Satan’s way of looking at it) of anything having a possibility of being back in balance, Satan, of course, would strike out to destroy that balance.**—Edith Schaeffer

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**Jesus and the New Testament on Marriage**

**Causes for divorce**

In parallel passages (Matt. 19:1–12; Mark 10:1–12) an issue is placed before Jesus for resolution as He is asked about divorce. The question under consideration is whether it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife.
This was a matter for discussion because Deuteronomy 24:1 allows for divorce for something “unseemly.” On the surface, the phrase appears vague. The Hebrew phrase *eruvat davar* usually refers to some type of sexual impropriety, as the expression’s use in other texts points to a range of issues from exposure of nakedness to adultery, even incest (Lev. 18:6–18; 20:11, 17, 20–21; Isa. 47:3; Ezek. 22:10; Hos. 2:10).

In Jesus’ time, something “unseemly” had expanded among some Jews to include almost anything offensive a wife may have done. The more conservative rabbinic school of Shammai limited divorce to immorality, but the school of Hillel extended the list of acceptable reasons for divorce to things as innocuous as a poorly cooked meal (and later, Rabbi Akiva’s teaching could even allow divorcing a woman for her loss of beauty). It is unclear if the separatist Qumran community took a view that prohibited divorce or only prohibited polygamy (Dead Sea Scrolls, Damascus Document 4:19–21—which in discussing Israel’s faithfulness invokes the principle of one wife). When Jesus is asked this question, it is because a wide range of views existed, including a full array of options for divorce.

In addition, a situation had arisen that made the question especially pertinent. The ruler Herod had left his first wife to marry Herodias, the wife of another brother; and Herodias had also left her husband, so two divorces were part of the sequence of these events (Mark 6:18).

The divorce process stated that a man in Judaism would present the wife with a certificate of divorce saying she was free to find a new husband (Mishnah *Gittin* 9.1–4). The noted instruction in the Mishnah did not allow the husband to limit who the woman could remarry within the confines of the law. Although on occasion, a woman could seek a divorce in Judaism, such circumstances were rare and usually involved women of high social status; or it occurred in a few communities that permitted it such as the Jewish Elephantine community. In Greco-Roman society anyone could get a divorce. The ancient world, much like our world today, gave a wide open door for divorce.

Jesus’ response goes back to the root issue of what marriage is. He states that divorce was permitted by Moses because of hardness of heart. In other words, divorce is undesirable. It is the product of a broken relationship and sin. Jesus goes back to the beginning and invokes the origin of marriage as the reference point for the question about divorce.
Purpose from creation

In His return to Genesis, Jesus’ point is that the goal of marriage is not to enter into it with the hopes of getting out of it. He begins with the fact humans were created as male and female, an allusion to Genesis 1:27. He then cites Genesis 2:24, which instructs that a man leave his mother and father and cling to his wife and the two will become one flesh, a fresh unit connected to function together. The Greek term for clinging \( (\text{kolláō}) \) means to bind together or attach.\(^9\) The implication is that here is a newly formed unit capable of contributing to creation, which may include producing and raising children. It is also here that Jesus makes it clear that marriage is designed to be between one man and one woman.

In a mysterious way this union is so intimate that two bodies become one entity, matched and paired up, together facing life’s situations. This design is not merely a contract or an arrangement of convenience; it is a bonding of body, spirit, and soul, making a new entity out of two entities. That bringing together is sacred, not secular, as it is God who makes them one and sees them in a sense as one. The unit is a sacred one. This is why Jesus’ remark that what God has put together should not be put asunder is the key part of His answer to the question. In marriage God forms a unit that is to exist, at least in its goal and design, until death breaks it apart. The Greek term for put together \( (\text{suzeugnumi}) \) refers to a yoking together, fusing to a unit something that was previously in parts.\(^10\)

Jesus evokes creation here to show the core elements of what marriage is about. It is the bonding of male and female, not merely in a chosen relationship to take or leave, but as a unit designed for support and protection, one part of God’s design for stewarding the creation. Marriage is to be the ideal place where children can be raised with a kind of mutual support and exposure to both genders, who are working in supportive cooperation.

In saying this about marriage, Scripture is not insisting that everyone be married. First Corinthians 7 makes it clear one can function as a steward in the creation and honor God while single, and this passage actually affirms that there are advantages to being single. Jesus Himself was unmarried yet noted that not everyone is prepared to be single (Matt. 19:1–12). Nor is this to argue that a couple is required to have children. It is simply that the family home with a mother and father is intended to produce an ideal environment for a child. The thrust of Jesus’ reply in appealing to Genesis is about the design of marriage as a place where a male and female can experience a relationship that offers support. Jesus was saying that because God made humans
into male and female from the beginning, a one-flesh union was also formed
to provide a means of support for those contributing to the creation. That
relationship was a part of the pinnacle of what God had created and needs to
be honored in a way that fits its divine intention.

**Mutuality in marriage**

Mutuality in marriage is illustrated powerfully in a text that often is mis-
understood with regard to its emphasis. The roles of husband and wife are
described in Ephesians 5:22–33 and Colossians 3:18–19. Often when these
texts are treated, it is the issue of power and authority between spouses that is
highlighted. The text does raise this theme and teach it, but it also reshapes it.
The husband is said to be the head of the wife and is called to love her. Wives
are called to be submissive to their husbands as to the Lord. Several aspects of
how this is said point to the fact that this is not primarily about power and
authority in the way our culture often discusses it.

First, the Ephesians passage is framed by the discussion about being filled
with the Spirit and being mutually submissive to one another (Eph. 5:16–
21). The Colossians passage is similarly framed by wearing the clothes of
character that reflect being part of the new man or new creation God brings
to us when we come into relationship with Him (Col. 3:1–17). We see a rela-
tional mutuality in how we live that is highlighted in the framing that comes
in Colossians; as Christians we live differently from those of the world. The
last link in that character chain is love—compassion, kindness, meekness, pa-
tience, forbearance, and forgiving are also included for how each of us should
carry ourselves (Col. 3:12–17). The love called for from husbands is to drink
out of this deep, Spirit-shaped character well.

Second, Ephesians spends three-and-a-half verses on the response of the
wife (Eph. 5:22–24, 33b) and eight-and-a-half verses on the role of the hus-
band (Eph. 5:25–33a). More importantly, when the carrying out of male
headship is described, the ideas tied to it are the example of Christ’s love, His
giving of Himself, how He presents her (the church) with splendor, loving her
as His own body, cherishing her like His own flesh, and culminating in the ci-
tation of Genesis 2:24 where the unity of the couple is highlighted. So we see
that headship involves caring for and serving one’s wife in ways that lift her
up and allow the couple to function as a unit. In this emphasis, Paul draws on
the example of how Jesus described those who lead (Mark 10:35–45)—those
who lead are to serve, not lord their position over others. In taking the time
to describe how the husband should love as head in the home, Paul flips the
way the world thinks of power and he describes a different kind of character, one that comes from being indwelt with the Holy Spirit. All this drives to the picture of the couple being one flesh, a team called to experience and steward life well together as man and woman.

THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE

A sacred bond

We have surveyed the definition of marriage in Scripture. We have seen that it is rooted deeply in the creation, coming as it does at the very start of the divine journey with human beings. It is even rooted in the gender differentiation that God provided for in the creation. The man and woman, male and female, were made in the image of God. In biblical terms, this lays the groundwork for marriage and the interdependence that comes from fusing this differentiation. This designed oneness of body, soul, and spirit is a part of what makes marriage a relationship unique from all others between individuals.

What we also saw in the Genesis text was the formation of a teamed relationship. Together a couple forms a shield of mutual support and protection in the midst of a call to steward the creation well. The man celebrated the arrival of the woman as a suitable complement to him. God provided the woman as a supportive completer of what the man brings to the creation. In that same differentiation and teamwork is provided an environment for children to grow, be nurtured, and flourish. A child, whether a son or daughter, gets to see both genders at work, side by side and mutually supportive. This is the design Genesis affirms for marriage.

Then came the fall. As we have discussed, because of the couple’s choice to take the fruit of the tree God had forbidden, the mutual support of each member of the couple was let down in both directions. The woman became deceived and led the man into thinking they could be like God. The man, despite being the direct recipient of the command of God, also partook of the error. The consequences came not when one of them failed, but when both of them failed. The cooperation that was to come from either side was missing with devastating consequences. The couple decided to act autonomously from their relationship to God in light of the serpent’s invitation to reject what God had called them to be, so in seeking to become what God alone is, their act was one not only of rebellion but idolatry.
Their action encapsulates many of the failures that plague humanity when life is pursued independently from God. This disruption led to the emergence of a rivalry between the man and the woman with blame for failure coming from each of them and direct responsibility being denied by both of them. The original design was disrupted and needed restoration.

Despite all this, Jesus affirmed the value of marriage and underscored its starting point. Jesus affirmed that divorce is an affront to what God does when He brings a couple together. It is the breaking not only of a vow between the two people but a sacred bond God creates. This is one of the reasons divorce is so painful. It tears at the soul of each partner and screams in a very public way the failure it represents. That is also what makes divorce so tragic and damaging, especially when children are in the mix.

Marriage is more than a mutually agreed upon arrangement between two people to be taken or left at one person's will. It is a sacred act, a bond involving three not two. It exists to help people carry out the divine call of being good stewards in a world that cries out to be managed well. A stable marriage has an important role in this calling, this mandate, a key piece in a much larger puzzle. Marriage was designed to be a foundation for the raising of children in a way that the child also could sense both a protection and the presence of people who care for their presence and livelihood.

Jesus also affirmed the nature of marriage as between a man and a woman. Consistently in Scripture, the idea of a same-sex union is never described in positive terms, not even in neutral tones, though we know that many today, motivated by a genuine desire for intimacy, are pursuing the sorts of relationships that are outside of God’s design for human relationships. The church needs to be a rallying point for those caught in this tension that is part of our fallen world, a tension that stems from seeking unhealthy substitutes for marriage.11 The brokenness we see in the world, even in heterosexual relationships, is also seen in a desire to go our own way in marital agreements. The “has God really said this” approach to the marital design issue or an approach that does not even care to consider the issues of design in marriage echoes the very kind of question the serpent raised in the garden.

The bond held together

The bond that is to hold a marriage together is of two strands. One strand involves recognition that a marriage is not merely a voluntary act of two people, but is a bond formed by and established by God. Of course, one of the reasons marriages struggle today is that many in the world never see the
sacred dimension in marriage—marriage is considered to be the product of a merely human act, so therefore it should be subject to the whims and foibles of human life. A marriage relationship according to this worldview can be entered into or escaped from by the stroke of a pen. And for some couples, cohabitation is a way of experimenting before entering into a marriage to see if it will work for them. This placing of the toe in the water, so to speak, really cannot fully replicate the commitment and bonding God gives to a marriage and that marriage really requires.\textsuperscript{12}

A second strand is a commitment to love and respect, something the passage in Ephesians raises. The powerful example of how Christ loves the church points to the selflessness and giving in marriage, traits that often are lacking. Simply thinking in terms of the other can serve as a corrective on the selfishness that impacts how we relate to each other. That selfishness produces the shrapnel that can damage a sense of union.

Oftentimes it is a loss of respect that eats away at the presence of love. This loss of respect, reinforced by actions, words, or a continuous combination of the two, leads a marriage to slowly die. The drift that sometimes causes someone to look to another outside the marriage loses sight of what created the original desire to bond. These pulls can come in many forms, but whatever their nature and origin, they represent a level of betrayal to original oaths given to each other and often made before God.

It is interesting that in Ephesians 5:32, Paul compares the bond of marriage to the relationship Christ has to His bride the church as a model for how the partners should relate to each other, with the call to the husband to love and to the wife to submit to and respect her husband. These roles also mirror to a degree the Trinity, where the Father directs and the Son mediates in a

\textit{God created man and woman directed to one another. God does not desire a history of individual human beings, but the history of the human community. However, God does not want a community that absorbs the individual into itself, but a community of human beings. In God’s eyes, community and individual exist in the same moment and rest in one another.\textsuperscript{13}—Dietrich Bonhoeffer}
perfect partnership of communion and teamwork, where there is an efficiency of cooperation to make the creation function and salvation work. The genuine community in marriage is designed to show what relationships are built to be, a relationship made of diverse parts yet driving toward unity built on trust. That union is designed to reflect on and mirror both how the Trinity works as well as how Christ relates to the church.

The openness and unique nature of this relationship means that the intimacy of marriage is reserved to this one special person to whom a bonding before God has taken place. It means that nakedness involves no shame. One can be open and vulnerable because a bonding of heart, soul, passion, respect, and commitment has taken place. In the arms of this supportive relationship, a servant heart can drive each member of the couple as they mutually support each other.

**OBSTACLES ON THE PATH TO MARITAL SUCCESS**

A look at our modern world shows many obstacles to success in terms of marriage and its design. A lack of example, the wrong kinds of values, an excessive sense of shame, just plain selfishness, or an underappreciation of fidelity can destroy what marriage is designed to be.

That marriage has fallen on hard times is a reflection of the array of distractions that ask, “Has God really said?” The failure to appreciate what a marriage is divinely designed for and what its potential can be helps produce the off ramps from marital vows. Opting away from marriage leads to all kinds of side effects that impact not just the couple, but children and other family members. The results point to implications for all of us, not just the couple who is not married or who is divorced.

The observations in a chapter like this are not intended to be harsh, but instructive and descriptive. The pursuit of marriage is enhanced by an awareness of God’s role in the marriage. It is made more secure by a complete commitment to mutual love and respect. Such a deep appreciation for marriage not only seeks to meet a divine design but also leads into a potential for human flourishing that the thin contemporary alternatives to marriage fail to provide. Scripture sets forth not a set of rules for life but a way of living, rooted in divine design, that leads to flourishing and aims at what is best for us. Such a lifestyle is beneficial to any person’s personal and spiritual well-being and is also advantageous to a more stable society.

Love and respect set a tone for the resolution of conflict that does not
result in resentment and a slow departure from relationship. Love and respect are a formula for marital recovery, looking to build out of and turn from momentary failure. In the context of a faith that exults in the role of mercy and forgiveness as seen in the example of Jesus, a platform is built from which human failure can recover from the common downfalls that frequently emerge in human relationships. An appreciation for what marriage is to be and how it benefits not just the couple but society can inspire us to become our better selves.

Especially in the context of human failure, an awareness of what Christian faith can supply by God’s presence and the Spirit’s power can bring an amazing reversal of direction. With God’s ability to transform, one can pursue restoration and reconciliation. By following the divine example of service (Matthew 20:28 tells us that Jesus “did not come to be served, but to serve” NIV) and care, one can find ways to overcome the conflicts that inevitably creep into human relationships. We see where we fit when we embrace marriage as sacred. When we appreciate marriage as designed not just for our own lives but also for society at large, we understand that how we conduct ourselves in marriage extends far beyond our humble households. Still, the path to marital success is not easy.

Our culture’s focus on what is good for me as an individual, with its sense of entitlement or an overwrought self-focus, gets in the way of building a bridge to the interdependence a marriage demands. What I get becomes more important and all-consuming, overshadowing what I can give. In a selfish society, the building of team can become challenging and the idea of self-sacrifice becomes counterintuitive.

Some people grow up without a good example to follow. Sociologists often chronicle the effects of children raised in broken homes or in contexts where they never knew a father and/or a mother. In some families, a generational legacy of broken marriages is present, making it difficult for couples to assume the lifelong commitment that is God’s design.

For others, a sense of shame about the body can undercut the giving that comes in intimacy, impairing one aspect of sharing that a marriage is designed to possess. When one or both partners has experienced abuse or trauma, the couple may need to seek help to overcome the damage. A person who has been seriously hurt may be more focused on an unhealthy notion of who they see themselves to be rather than on who they are and what they have to give and share. Being aware that one is with someone who cares about them as a whole person, someone with whom they are comfortable sharing the
closeness of a unique relationship is a healthy step toward healing.

Our larger society’s indifference to fidelity erodes the presence of examples that underscore what marriage can be and often is for many. The widespread portrayal of infidelity and access to it, which certainly is common in our world, in our arts and media, and a part of the reality of many lives, is rarely countered with anything but a “this is real life” feel. The inevitability of such constant images actually attacks the vision for a different kind of world and a different kind of marriage. Saying “it happens to everyone” dulls us to the impact of those regularly made choices.

CONCLUSION

The appeal of a look at marriage in Scripture is not a longing to go back to the good old days. The old days were not always so good either. Rather, it is a reminder that marriage was originally designed to be a safe haven for our children and for us. A stable home allows the creation to function better than the pieces of a dysfunctional world that emerges when families roam or get lost. Good homes in society come by one committed couple at a time.

That means that each couple needs to appreciate what marriage is as well as what it is for. They recall that truth is not just for their own sake but also for others, that their marriage is greater than the two people in it. It is an institution made by God and vowed before Him for a reason. God had in mind ultimate goals for our society as a whole when He designed marriage. It is at the very start of the human story because it matters for the human story. Regaining what has been lost and what is fallen is a core part of the biblical take on life and what God’s design is all about. “Marriage is one” means God chose to allow us to steward our creation well. Because God knew what He was doing when He designed marriage, we do well to appreciate and follow that design. We are all served well when each of us in a marriage understands its uniqueness and the potential stability it gives to individual lives, society, and the creation. We do even better when that understanding is lived out with a partner and family who appreciate all that makes a marriage precious, special, and unique. A good marriage honors God and leads to a better, more stable world.
CONTINUING INSIGHT:

COHABITATION IN BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

by David L. Woodall

Perhaps no other verse has been misused more than 1 Corinthians 6:12: “I have the right to do anything” (niv). Anything? A history of the church could be written documenting the sinful actions that have been justified by citing the apparent freedom granted in this verse. The history begins with the Corinthians themselves. Modern translators place quotation marks around this saying to correctly identify it as a statement from the Corinthians (often called a “Corinthian slogan”) articulating their erroneous theology. They justified two immoral actions based on this saying. First, a member of the church felt emboldened to cohabit with his stepmother in a sexually active relationship (1 Cor. 5:1), and second, certain men in the church argued for the freedom to eat a cultic meal in an idol’s temple and to be sexually active with the prostitutes provided as part of the after-dinner festivities (1 Cor. 6:15–17).

A similar type of Corinthian error has invaded our culture today. In the spring of 1968, the New York Times revealed that a certain local college student was breaking the law. Her behavior was illegal in New York and every state at the time, and her actions violated the ethical demands of the four-year liberal arts college where she attended. Her crime? She was living off campus with her boyfriend. The reporter was investigating a new cultural phenomenon that was birthed in the sexual revolution of the 1960s and fueled by the availability of contraception. Students called it “shacking up” or “the arrangement,” but many Americans at the time called it simply “living in sin.” Today we call it cohabitation—two unmarried members of the opposite sex living together in a sexually active relationship.

A 1968 Life magazine article suggested that a future anthropologist might consider this event as “a moment in which the morality of an era changed.”
And so it did. Today as many as 70 percent of first marriages among women aged 18–35 are preceded by cohabitation. A 2016 Barna study revealed that the majority of Americans (65 percent) now believe that cohabitation before marriage is a good idea. Especially disturbing in this study is the conclusion that 41 percent of practicing Christians strongly or somewhat strongly agree that cohabitation is a good idea. The Corinthian error, which justified sexual relations outside of marriage in the context of cohabitation, is being repeated. How should the church respond?

Paul’s exhortation to the church in 1 Corinthians 5:2–13 outlines a proper response to a church member involved in cohabitation. The church first needs to repent of any pride (1 Cor. 5:2) and boasting (v. 6)—the type of attitude that looks the other way, caught up in the spirit of tolerance or the desire to not upset an influential member—and replace it with a period of mourning (v. 2). Our culture views cohabitation as a private matter between two individuals; Paul views it as an occasion for community grief.

The church must be fully convinced that cohabitation is an open rejection of biblical morality (vv. 3, 12–13)—an activity that impacts the entire church (v. 6) and should not be practiced by those who claim the name of Christ (vv. 9–11). The church should then intervene in the lives of cohabiting church members by exhorting them to turn from their cohabitation and reestablish purity. The ultimate goal of the correction is the spiritual benefit that comes to individuals when their sinful tendency is changed into obedience (v. 5). If, however, the intervention fails (as it did in ancient Corinth), Paul repeatedly exhorts the church to no longer identify the unrepentant cohabitor as a member of the church (vv. 2, 4–5, 6–7, 11, 13). Christian lifestyle must match Christian confession.

Current research on cohabitation has also confirmed the practical benefits of living a biblical lifestyle. Cohabiting couples tend to have both difficulties within the cohabiting relationship and decreased marital stability after marriage. The research is so conclusive concerning the negative impact of cohabitation that is has been labelled the “cohabitation effect.” First Corinthians 5, therefore, unmasks the immorality of cohabitation and calls on the church to correct those who do not repent.

First Corinthians 6:12–20 identifies and reacts against the wrong Corinthian thinking that justified sexual relations outside of marriage. The main theological error centers around an incorrect view of the physical body. The Corinthians argued that what they did with their physical body was morally irrelevant. In addition to their general slogan in 1 Corinthians 6:12, they also
claimed, “Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both” (v. 13a niv). Their argument went something like this: the stomach has a craving for food, and food satisfies that craving. Likewise, the body has a craving for sexual relations, and a sexual relationship satisfies that craving. In both situations, a physical craving is satisfied apart from moral concerns. They also concluded that sexual relations are inconsequential because the body will ultimately be destroyed (v. 13b).9

Paul counters their wrong thinking with five arguments. First, any claim of freedom must always be limited by a concern for the benefit of others (v. 12).10 The number one reason for entering cohabitation is to test compatibility for marriage, just like a person might test drive a car to see how it performs.11 But human beings are created in the image of God with dignity and worth. They are not inanimate objects that can be discarded when no longer useful. The essence of marriage is an unconditional lifetime commitment to another person that transcends circumstances. Cohabitation is not marriage because, regardless of the level of commitment, it still lacks the permanence of a marriage commitment.

Second, the physical body is meant to be used for the benefit of the Lord, not for sexual freedom (v. 13). Third, the physical body is not destined for destruction; the physical body is destined for resurrection (v. 14). Fourth, the physical body of a Christian is joined to the Lord (vv. 15–17). This union means that sexual relationship must be compatible with the will of the Lord. Cohabitation, union with a prostitute, and any sexual relationship outside of marriage is a rejection of the lordship of Christ.

Finally, Paul summarizes his arguments by a single command—flee sexual immorality (v. 18a)—and by developing a Trinitarian theology: individual bodies are the dwelling place (temples) of the Holy Spirit (v. 19), purchased by the blood of Christ (v. 20a), and therefore must be used in a way that honors God (v. 20b).

Particularly instructive is Paul’s quotation of Genesis 2:24 in 1 Corinthians 6:16. This reflects the biblical narrative of creation, fall, and redemption. The creation account identifies marriage as a permanent, public, committed relationship in which a male and a female establish a new family unit. The entrance of sin into the world gave birth to individualism and rebellion against the Creator and His design for marriage. Permanence was replaced with fleeting relationships; public declarations of intent were replaced by private encounters; covenant commitment was replaced by conditional arrangements; chastity in marriage was replaced with sex divorced from a permanent commitment.
Cohabitation is not marriage! Why is it wrong? The Genesis quotation gives us the reason: it has nothing to do with marriage and the creation of a never-ending covenant relationship with another person of the opposite sex. It is a willful rejection of God’s plan for the creation of a family unit, in which sexual relations illustrate the complete oneness of a new and binding relationship. May the church seek to redeem this unbiblical trend by strengthening biblical marriage, rejecting cohabitation among church members, and developing a biblical view of the physical body.
The American Psychological Association describes itself as “the leading scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States, with more than 115,700 researchers, educators, clinicians, consultants and students as its members.” 1 Under the topic of marriage and divorce on their website, they adapt a statement from a major encyclopedia of psychology to begin their discussion with these observations:

Marriage and divorce are both common experiences. In Western cultures, more than 90 percent of people marry by age 50. Healthy marriages are good for couples’ mental and physical health. They are also good for children; growing up in a happy home protects children from mental, physical, educational and social problems. However, about 40 to 50 percent of married couples in the United States divorce. The divorce rate for subsequent marriages is even higher.2

The APA is a very secular organization. After these introductory comments in this article, the writers move immediately to how to make divorce as “healthy” as possible. So it is all the more telling that they recognize how valuable good marriages are for couples and their children alike.

Numerous sources decry the seeming parallels between statistics involving
marriage and divorce among Christians and those from our society overall. But several years ago, Ron Sider observed that when one limits one’s studies to theologically conservative evangelical Christians who consistently practice various spiritual disciplines, the percentage of marital breakups (and of numerous other compromises with worldly behavior) plummets. Christian marriages today may face unprecedented challenges, but fidelity remains possible, and happy relationships can still be achieved. Much depends on couples’ expectations and commitments. Are husbands and wives truly prepared to put others above self and to keep promises made for life, irrespective of those ever-so-transient feelings that are mistaken for true love?

Divorce, however, is just the tip of the iceberg in our culture’s changed attitudes toward marriage. Not only do Christians turn a blind eye to those who have been divorced and remarried for reasons not even remotely linked to the genuinely exceptional situations in which the Bible permits these actions, but in many “evangelical” congregations, some couples live together as sexual partners without being married. Other Christians tolerate or even celebrate homosexual relationships, all the more so now that the Supreme Court has legalized same-sex marriage. The next development already unfolding outside the church is the normalization of polyamorous relationships—groups of men and women who agree to consensual sexual relationships, heterosexually or homosexually, within the group, but pledge not to have sex with others, thereby distinguishing the situation from simple promiscuity. Some individuals, of course, know very well what the Bible teaches but choose to disobey it. Others, however, propose revisionist interpretations, believing that their behavior does not contradict Scripture after all. Still others are too unfamiliar with either the Bible’s contents or competing interpretations even to know that there is a very good chance that God is quite displeased with their chosen lifestyles.

What does Scripture teach? More specifically, what does the New Testament teach? Christians must take both Old and New Testaments into account on any topic, but with the New Testament representing the fulfillment of the Old Testament, they cannot turn to Old Testament texts by themselves to determine God’s will for their lives without asking how those texts have been fulfilled in Christ and therefore potentially to be applied differently today than before Christ came. Readers of both testaments must similarly be alert for where culturally specific conditions colored first-century Scriptures in ways that make their applications today differ as well. But at least for the New Testament this is a more straightforward process of interpretation in that it does not first require assessing the relationships between the testaments.
The Choice and High Calling of Marriage and Singleness

The traditional English-language wedding ceremony contains two clauses in it that summarize perhaps the two most important strands of New Testament teaching about marriage. First, it should “not be entered into unadvisedly or lightly.” Second, it promises fidelity “till death do us part.” The first of these tends to get much less attention than the second, so it is important to address both themes. Both of them run contrary to today’s secular “wisdom,” which so easily infests the church. The rest of this chapter, therefore, unfolds each of these in more detail.

NOT TO BE ENTERED UNADVISEDLY: THE NEED FOR VALUING SINGleness AND CELIBACY

There are two sides to the church’s historic emphasis on careful consideration before ever marrying. One is that even when God seems to intend for individuals to be married, they should consider carefully who they marry and how quickly. The second half of this chapter will return to this topic. Here we want to focus on what Roman Catholics have overemphasized, leading to a Protestant overreaction by underemphasis: the value of singleness and celibacy. Because some Christians in the early centuries of the church, drawing more on Greek philosophy than biblical teaching, developed the idea that the highest levels of spirituality represented by their clergy and members of monastic orders occurred when people refrained from sexual relationships altogether, Protestants historically have undervalued the biblical teaching that God calls some people to a life of singleness and celibacy.

Too little reflection is devoted to the fact that the one, perfect, sinless man in the history of the world, Jesus of Nazareth, never married. When sexual desire is seen as itself sinful, this is understandable, but the Bible never teaches this ancient Greek notion. Adam, before the fall, was sinless as well, and yet God had declared that it was not good for him to be alone (Gen. 2:18). His initial relationship with Eve was both sexual and pure (v. 25). So why did God not exemplify the redemption of humanity by creating a second, sinless marriage? Of course, all kinds of complicating factors immediately rush in when one imagines God incarnate being married, which need not detain us here. The only point I wish to make is that Jesus, as a man who lived to be at least thirty-three years of age while remaining single and celibate, would have stood out dramatically in the Jewish culture of his day. Healthy young men were encouraged to take a wife by about the age of eighteen (Mishnah ‘Abot 5.21). Not all marriages were arranged, but many were. Do we ever imagine
what it might have been like for Jesus trying to dissuade Mary and Joseph from seeking a bride for Him?

In this light, it is interesting to see how little is said about the spouses of any of Jesus’ first followers. The only way we even know that Peter was mar-

For the sage says that parents provide goods and houses for their children, but a wife is given by God alone (Prov. 19:14), everyone according to his need, just as Eve was given to Adam by God alone. And true though it is that because of exceeding lust of the flesh lighthearted youth pays scant attention to these matters, marriage is nevertheless a weighty matter in the sight of God. —Martin Luther

ried is because Jesus healed his mother-in-law (Mark 1:30)! Were the other disciples married? Odds are good that they were, but we hear nothing about it. Luke 18:29–30 may hint at it when Jesus declares, “no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.” As this quotation reminds us, however, just because the disciples had families didn’t prevent Jesus from calling them to leave their wives and children for extended periods of time during the roughly three years of His ministry to go “on the road” with Him.

Elsewhere Jesus warns His followers that members of their own households may be divided against each other, especially when spiritual loyalties conflict (Matt. 10:35–36), and He insists, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). Matthew’s version reassures us that Jesus means that whoever loves family members more than Him is not worthy of Him (Matt. 10:37). The Greek and Hebrew words for “love” and “hate” in contexts like these can refer to “love more” and “love less,” but the contrast remains jarring. One of the troubling realities of contemporary life is how many parents, including Christian parents, pressure their adult children to not move too far away from them, especially when grandchildren are involved, stifling the children’s ability to follow God’s lead to any part of the world, and this when technology gives us almost instant access to one another!

Other passages in the Gospels that relativize the importance of family
relationships and traditional domestic arrangements include Luke 8:1–3 and 10:38–42. Imagine the potential scandal caused by a group of women, at least one of whom was married (Joanna—8:3), accompanying Jesus and the Twelve in their itinerant ministry, especially when they didn’t always have supporters who would put them up for the night. The pair of sisters, Mary and Martha, who lived with their brother Lazarus (John 11:2; 12:1–2), would have formed an unusual household for those days. We don’t know if any of them were ever married, but apparently they were not during the years of Jesus’ ministry. When Martha is preoccupied with domestic responsibilities, Mary adopts the traditional posture of the male disciples—sitting at Jesus’ feet—in order to learn from him (10:39). Jesus rebukes Martha and praises Mary (vv. 41–42) but the church has turned Martha more than Mary into the ideal role model for women in far too many settings ever since!

Mark 12:18–27 and parallel passages are usually avoided in Christian discussions about marriage vs. celibacy. There Jesus clarifies for the skeptical Sadducees, who did not believe in an afterlife, that the eternal state does indeed exist—“He is not the God of the dead, but of the living” (v. 27)—but will not include marriage and sex. Yet Jesus goes further and stresses that resurrection is embodied. Apparently, there are more wonderful pleasures in store for God’s people than sexual release and even the exclusive interpersonal intimacy of marriage. Whatever those pleasures are and whatever kinds of relationships we will have with other believers and with Christ Himself, who elsewhere calls us His bride (Rev. 19:7; 21:2, 9; 22:17), they will last forever, unlike the fleeting pleasures of even the longest and most wonderful marriage in this life. Single adults will not be able to complain that they missed out on anything!

Did Anna understand something of this? Luke tells us that “she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four” (Luke 2:36–37a). As a very young widow, perhaps in her early twenties, she would have experienced considerable pressure in a traditional Jewish society to remarry. But Luke presents her, now in old age, as a long-standing model of piety, exercising a consistent ministry of prayer and worship in the temple precincts (vv. 37b–38). A very different kind of example, one who may well have repeatedly entered into marriage lightly or unadvisedly, is the Samaritan woman at the well, who has had five husbands and is now living with a man to whom she is not married (John 4:18). We do not know the circumstances that led to this tragic state of affairs; they may not have been entirely or even largely her fault. But we do rejoice that with Jesus no one is beyond the pale when it comes to redemption.
Perhaps the most important passage in the Gospels that reminds us that not everyone should get married is Matthew 19:12. Here Jesus notes that there are three kinds of “eunuchs”: those who were born with a deformity, those castrated or emasculated by others, and those who voluntarily choose a life of celibacy for the sake of undivided devotion to God’s kingdom. Recent revisionist exegesis has tried to apply one or more of these categories to homosexuals, but there is no genuine linguistic or cultural evidence to support such a link. Even if some should emerge, it would not help the cause of those who want to justify endorsing homosexual acts because the whole point of the verse is to highlight that God calls some people to refrain from all sex. The point of Jesus’ final comment in this passage—“the one who can accept this should accept it”—does not mean that Jesus’ ethics are optional or that only some people are able to obey them. As the conclusion to verse 12, it refers back to the immediately preceding clause: whoever is able to live a single, and therefore, celibate life should do so. The Voice clarifies by translating, “Anyone who can embrace that call should do so.” The converse does not logically follow—that a person who does not think they can live celibately is free to indulge outside of monogamous, heterosexual marriage. It just means they do not have to stay single if they get a chance to marry.

Paul elaborates on the decision between marriage and singleness in 1 Corinthians 7. This chapter has confused many readers before the growing consensus among contemporary scholarship to follow the oldest known commentary on 1 Corinthians (by Origen in about AD 200) and acknowledge verse 1b as a Corinthian slogan by a faction in the church in Corinth that was overly exalting celibacy. Thus the CEB, CJB, ESV, HCSB, NAB, NET, and NIV all use quotation marks around the saying that the 2011 NIV translates as “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” The Greek verb for “to have sexual relations” literally means “to touch,” but touching in contexts like this was often a euphemism for sexual relations (just like “to know” in Hebrew could function similarly—Adam knew his wife, Eve, and children resulted!).

All of 1 Corinthians 7 makes sense, then, as Paul’s repeated “yes, but” approach to the pro-celibacy faction in Corinth. The main point spans verses 1b–2. Paul can affirm the value of choosing celibacy but because so many people are already sinning sexually it is better for most people to marry or stay married and sexually active within the marriage. He then applies this general principle to specific marital categories of couples. To those promoting celibacy within marriage, Paul says they may do so briefly, if both husband and wife...
agree and they do so to free up time for spiritual disciplines, but they must then come back together again sexually so that neither partner is tempted to look for sexual gratification with someone else (vv. 3–7). When he explains in verse 6—he says this “as a concession, not as a command”—as with Jesus that again does not make his instruction optional. Verse 7 clarifies: “I wish that all of you were as I am”—i.e., unmarried (see v. 8). But he understands that is unrealistic. His concession in verse 6, therefore, must refer to husband and wife coming back together again sexually—his last thought in verse 5.26

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Our love has been anything but perfect and anything but static. Inevitably there have been times when one of us has outrun the other and has had to wait patiently for the other to catch up. There have been times when we have misunderstood each other, demanded too much of each other, been insensitive to the other’s needs. I do not believe there is any marriage where this does not happen. The growth of love is not a straight line, but a series of hills and valleys. I suspect that in every good marriage there are times when love seems to be over. Sometimes these desert lines are simply the only way to the next oasis, which is far more lush and beautiful after the desert crossing than it could possibly have been without it.27—Madeleine L’Engle

Verses 8 and 9 address the agamos and chērais, literally to “the unmarried” and to “the widows.” But Paul will address the never married beginning in verse 25, and a masculine form of chēra (“widow”) was not used in koine Greek.28 So it seems likely that Paul is using the masculine plural form of the “unmarried” to refer to widowers (see the NIV footnote). Because Paul identifies himself as someone who remains unmarried in this precise context, it may well be that he too is a widower. Advancing as far as he had in Judaism before his Damascus Road experience makes it very likely that he would have been married; only very rarely were rabbis, members of the Sanhedrin, or other Jewish leaders never married.29 But, as a Christian, his values have changed. Marriage and family are not the virtual “be-all and end-all” of life as they were perceived to be by many within Judaism. He goes much further in supporting the pro-celibacy factions here by expressing his preference for widowers and widows not to remarry. But again he realizes he cannot absolutize this attitude.
Indeed, when faced in Ephesus with young widows who stir up trouble because they have not remarried and settled into family responsibilities, he encourages them to marry again (1 Tim. 5:11–14).30

In 1 Corinthians 7:10–16, Paul turns to those married who are contemplating divorce or have already divorced but not remarried. We will say more about these verses in the second half of this chapter, but for now the only point to note is what the pro-celibacy faction in Corinth would have said: in essence, “great—leave so you are not tempted to have more marital intimacy.” Again, Paul allows this under one condition—if the partner who wants to leave is an unbeliever, the believing spouse is not bound to try to stop them at all costs (v. 15).31 But otherwise Paul is clearly supporting the preservation of marriage.

Verses 17–24 form a kind of interlude in the chapter that may be summarized with the agricultural metaphor, “bloom where you are planted.” In other words, don’t feel you must change your marital status (or various other kinds of status also) just because you have become a believer.32 Verses 25–35 then return exclusively to the issues raised by the pro-celibacy faction. To the never married—the “virgins” (v. 25)—this faction would have urged perpetual abstinence, calling them to stay single and celibate throughout their lives. Once again, Paul can affirm that perspective up to a point. But he stresses that those who marry do not sin (v. 28). His reasons for supporting singleness, however, are quite different from those of the faction. They promote abstinence because they see the indulgence of bodily appetites as inherently sinful. Paul recognizes the advantages that singleness offers a person for undivided allegiance to Christ and His kingdom. The needs of a spouse, and children if present, even in the best of times can distract from wholehearted service to the Lord and the use of one’s spiritual gifts (vv. 32–35). Some commentators have imagined that Paul would not have said these things to the church in Corinth in better days; after all, they were still not that many years removed from an empire-wide famine (Acts 11:28). Perhaps this is even what “the present crisis” in verse 26 is alluding to.34 But in fact, Corinth was one of the wealthiest cities in Greece, able to rebound from such setbacks the fastest, and the actual reason Paul gives for his teaching is that “the time is short” (v. 29). Most likely, that is the “present crisis,” Christ could return at any time.35 That rationale is all the more true today as we are roughly two thousand years closer to the time of the second coming, whenever that should prove to be. So Paul’s teaching remains as relevant as ever.

In verses 36–38 Paul finally considers the case of an engaged couple, won-
dering whether or not to go through with their marriage.³⁶ The pro-celibacy faction would have doubtless told them to be glad they had not finalized their vows, that they could still get out of this undesirable relationship that led to sex! For one last time, Paul agrees that it is possible to break an engagement if there is no resolve by both parties to move forward, but he steadfastly refuses to absolutize any call for the single life.

I am aware of the occasional pastor, youth worker, or other kind of Christian leader who properly stresses 1 Corinthians 7, especially verses 26–35, in instructing those contemplating marriage. A good way to phrase things is to ask someone, even while they are dating or courting a potential mate but before any kind of commitments have been made, “Is this someone with whom, if you were married, you would be able to serve God and use your spiritual gifts more effectively or less so?” But the majority of Christian ministries never couch things in these terms. Some even encourage Christians to marry considerably younger than they typically do today,³⁷ without acknowledging the widespread lack of maturity and availability of support systems that in other times and places in history made that more realistic.

In 1 Timothy Paul again has to address false teachers who are promoting celibacy as a moral absolute—forbidding people to marry (4:3a) as part of an ascetic agenda (vv. 1–4). Probably because Paul is writing Timothy directly and the church only more indirectly, he can use stronger words here than in 1 Corinthians.³⁸ He maintains that these ascetics are teaching doctrines of demons and have cauterized people’s consciences (vv. 1–2). But this is not because Paul has suddenly changed his mind and is opposing all forms of restraint. It could be that the false teachers in Ephesus where Timothy was Paul’s delegate (1:3) were insisting on abstinence from all sex and certain foods as requirements for salvation.³⁹ That would explain why Paul insists in 2:15a that “women [lit., “she”] will be saved through childbearing.” Paul cannot mean individual women; he has already taught the Ephesians that salvation is by grace through faith, not any kind of good works (Eph. 2:8–9). Individual women will be saved “if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety” (1 Tim. 2:15b). But the gender as a whole must not capitulate to the call to stop marrying and bearing children. In other words, Paul may be countering the claim that salvation comes only through singleness!⁴⁰

Today’s Christian singles repeatedly attest to feeling like second-class citizens in many evangelical churches. Preaching, adult Sunday school classes, small groups, and leadership roles of many kinds all seem to cater much more to the married. Unthinking peers, like older adults who are or have been
married, regularly ask them why they are still single or how the quest for a partner is coming (whether or not they are looking for one)! There is next to no affirmation for any who might begin to wonder if God had called and gifted them for celibacy. Yet when we look at what a man like John Stott, the international Anglican statesman, was able to accomplish in his lifetime or what Lottie Moon, the indefatigable Southern Baptist missionary to China of a generation ago did in hers, both of whom believed they were called by God to remain unmarried, we see the wisdom in seeking out and encouraging young people to consider singleness as an honorable estate. Many other examples throughout church history could be cited as well. I personally have single, celibate Christian friends of many different ages who attest to very fulfilling lives. They may be able to travel and minister in parts of the world that it would be next to impossible to bring a spouse or children into. They have the freedom to drop everything to meet hurting people’s needs much more easily than others usually can. They have good small groups, supportive churches, and a cluster of close friends of both genders who meet their needs for fellowship in many different ways.

Marriage and sexual relations truly should not be entered into lightly or unadvisedly, no matter what our culture and even our Christian culture may say.

TILL DEATH DO US PART: THE NEED FOR LIFELONG COMMITMENTS AND PROMISE-KEEPING

When a couple does get married, they should move heaven and earth, so to speak, to stay married. If you can’t trust someone to keep the most solemn and whole-life embracing promise they will ever make, how can you trust them to keep any other promises? This question sounds unbearably harsh but reveals just how out of sync our culture, and many of our churches, are with biblical teaching. We have fallen victim to Hollywood beyond our wildest imaginations. Try to envision someone in biblical cultures asking a young person, especially if his or her marriage was arranged by their parents, “are you in love with your fiancé(e) (or spouse)”? The result would probably resemble Golde’s reaction to Tevye in Fiddler on the Roof, when he asks, “Do you love me?” and she exclaims, “Do I what?!”. My wife and I were fortunate enough thirty-eight years ago to have a young pastor, guiding us through his first-ever premarital counseling sessions in preparation for his first wedding, whose initial question to each of us was, “why do you want to marry [the other one of us]?”. I had learned enough biblical teaching already by then to
know I’d be in trouble if I simply answered, “because I’m in love with her.” At best, he’d ask me to explain what true, Christian love was. At worst, he’d say, “Oh come on, Craig, you know that’s not a good enough answer.” In our young adults Monday night fellowship, as in our Sunday morning Bible class, he had stressed repeatedly that love was a commitment not an emotion. If you can “fall” in love, you can fall out of it again! A promise to remain faithful for a lifetime cannot be based on feelings that come and go.

It is telling that arranged marriages in traditional societies have a far smaller divorce rate than marriages in modern Western cultures, including modern Western Christian cultures. I am not advocating for a return to arranged marriages; I am a product of modernity as well, and quite happy with my selection of a wife! But I do sit up and take notice when a friend of mine who has spent his adult life with his wife as a missionary in a largely Islamic country and is raising four girls and one boy says completely seriously that he’s glad he raised his girls in a moderate Islamic subculture rather than in America because the average dating experience of the Anglo young adult in the States is “practice for divorce”? In other words, relationships form and dissolve repeatedly in our Western culture, making it less difficult (even if usually still more painful) for marriages to break up as well.

The biblical foundations for marriage, of course, begin in the Old Testament, in the Genesis narrative, before the fall of the first couple into sin. Genesis 2:24 explains that “a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.” Both Jesus and Paul refer back to these foundations. Jesus does so in Mark 10:7–8, paralleled in Matthew 19:5, as justification for His command that no one should separate what God has joined together. In context, Jesus does not distinguish between certain marriages that God has joined together and others that He has not. Rather, He is arguing that because of the way God designed marriage as an institution, all marriages are intended to be preserved intact.

With this Old Testament background established, we should not be surprised that New Testament vice lists regularly include *porneia* among those sins to be avoided (Matt. 15:19; Mark 7:21; 1 Cor. 6:13, 18; 2 Cor. 12:21; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 5:3; Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 4:3; Rev. 9:21). *Porneia* was the broadest term for inappropriate sexual relations in the Greek language and included premarital sex, extramarital sex (which by itself could also be called *moicheia*—“adultery”), indecent exposure, homosexual sex, prostitution, polygamy, and bestiality; in short, any kind of sexual relations outside of monogamous, heterosexual marriage. Contemporary English does not have
any single word that embraces all of this; the King James Version “fornication” of Elizabethan English comes close but few people use that expression in common parlance.

Roman Catholicism has elevated marriage to the level of a sacrament, appropriate for the vast majority of humanity, even while stressing that a spiritually elite few can and should be celibate. Often John 2:1–12 is cited (as also in Protestant circles) as an example of Jesus blessing, dignifying, and even sanctifying a wedding ceremony. As a matter of fact, the text says nothing at all about Jesus doing something of this nature, only that He provided a large quantity of wine in miraculous fashion when the expected supply had prematurely run out. We have to return to Mark 10:2–10 and Matthew 19:3–9 for His primary teaching on the topic.

The schools of the two major Pharisaic rabbis of the generation just before Jesus, Hillel and Shammai, debated the circumstances in which divorce was permitted. Both acknowledged that sexual infidelity required divorce and thus permitted remarriage, just as virtually every writer on the topic in the Greco-Roman world of the day did as well. In fact, in the ancient world, remarriage after divorce was expected. But were there other permissible conditions as well? Hillel took a very liberal approach to the topic; Shammai a very conservative one. Intriguingly, both cited the same text from Deuteronomy 24:1—“If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house . . .” Hillel emphasized the Hebrew behind “something” and took it to mean just about anything that could be described as inappropriate or indecorous. Shammai, on the other hand, emphasized the Hebrew for “indecent,” understanding it as limited to sexual immorality.

Jesus cuts through all this casuistry. The Pharisees are trying to trap Him by getting Him to take sides in their debate so that someone will be upset with Him. In Mark He appears to make no allowance for divorce of any kind, but if the culture was all agreed on infidelity as the one legitimate justification for divorce, Mark’s narrative may simply assume that understanding. Matthew, however, makes it explicit with what has come to be known as His “exception clause”—Matthew 19:9 (cf. also 5:32). But nowhere does Jesus mandate divorce. Even when the exclusive bonds of sexual intimacy have been broken, forgiveness and restoration remain the ideal. Permission to divorce is a concession to human sin, not an announcement of the divine will.

It is too easy, nevertheless, to spend all of one’s time debating divorce in Jesus’
teaching and miss the main point of His response to the Pharisees. God, from
the beginning of the creation of human beings, intended for husbands and
wives to stay together (Mark 10:6–9; Matt. 19:4–6). The time of the Law of
Moses introduced a kind of parenthesis into God’s plans for humanity, and
God was more lenient with respect to divorce, because of people’s hardheart-
edness (Mark 10:4–5; Matt. 19:7–8). But that was never God’s permanent
or ideal intention for humanity. While some Christians read these texts too
carelessly and then appeal to hardheartedness as a reason for divorce today,
Jesus is clear: that excuse ended with His coming, His death, resurrection,
and sending of the Spirit at Pentecost, which together signaled the end of the
period of the Law.50 In many respects, the age of new creation returns to the
original ideals of creation; in some cases it goes even further and anticipates
the consummation of all things in the eternal state.

How does Jesus understand the commands of God to Adam and Eve?
Mark 10:11–12 makes it plain that He is thinking reciprocally. What is per-
mitted or prohibited for the man is the same as what is permitted or pro-
hibited for the woman (cf. also throughout 1 Cor. 7). Both the Jewish and
Greco-Roman worlds of Jesus’ day had huge double standards that gave men
all sorts of freedom to mistreat their spouses that women did not have.51 Jesus
banished these double standards. We may assume the same is true for Gene-
sis 2:24. Of course, in days when extended families often lived together, the
separation was not necessarily geographical.

It is better to stress that what in old-fashioned English was called “leaving
and cleaving” denotes the transfer of one’s most important human loyalty
from parents to spouse.52 “Becoming one flesh” then refers to the consum-
mation of the marriage in sexual relations, but it is hardly limited to that.
Everything that brings a man and a woman closer together—spiritually, emo-
tionally, intellectually, socially—may come under its purview. The simple, old
diagram still represents profound truths: if husband and wife are positioned
at the two vertices on the base of an equilateral triangle and each makes a
priority of moving closer to God, at the apex of the triangle, they will of
necessity move closer to each other. Any claim that “God told me” to do
something to my spouse that does not promote His revealed will and char-
acter, including repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and sanctification is
a serious misunderstanding of God’s will and communication. God does not
command husbands and wives to do things that bring hostility, alienation,
estrangement, or separation into a marriage.

If Matthew presents an “exception clause,” 1 Corinthians 7 offers what has
come to be known, somewhat strangely, as the “Pauline privilege.” Many have thought that the key to this second exception to the general “no divorce” policy of the New Testament is that believers and unbelievers are “unequally yoked” (cf. 2 Cor. 6:14 esv). This is no doubt true, but in light of Genesis 2:24 it may be that the key piece is the one spouse’s desire to abandon the other with no intention of return. After all, if the two constituent elements of a marriage are transfer of interpersonal loyalty from parents to spouse and holistic intimacy, then abandonment ruptures the element of interpersonal loyalty, and sexual infidelity ruptures the exclusivity of the intimacy. So a Christian spouse who deserts his or her mate and marries someone else does not consign the abandoned individual to lifelong singleness. The mate who was abandoned is free to remarry, “only in the Lord” (just as with a widow; see 1 Cor. 7:39–40).

Again, however, there is no requirement that even a non-Christian and a Christian who are already married must separate. If the non-Christian is willing to continue living with the Christian, they are to stay together. The situation in Corinth was most likely where two non-Christians were already married and one converted but the other didn’t. Paul recognizes spinoff blessings for the rest of the family if even just one parent is a believer (v. 14).53 First Corinthians 7:16 is a notoriously difficult verse to translate because of a built-in ambiguity in the Greek syntax. It could mean, “how do you know if you will save your husband/wife?” (a more negative rendering) or “for all you know you might save your husband/wife” (a more optimistic rendering). Either way, “the brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace” (v. 15). The believing partner need not continue harassing the unbeliever to try to preserve the marriage when, after a period of time, it becomes clear that the unbeliever has no desire or intention of remaining in it.54

Are sexual infidelity and abandonment, then, the only legitimate grounds for divorce for a believer? If they are, then we have a very strange situation. Jesus is asked about a Pharisaic debate on divorce and acknowledges one and only one exception to the main point of staying in the marriage. Paul addresses a new situation of mixed marriages in Gentile communities that would not yet have been relevant to what Jesus would teach as a Jew before the establishment of the church. He, too, supplies one and only one exception to the main point of remaining married.

If either Jesus or Paul were intending to give a comprehensive list of exceptions, then one or both of them have contradicted the other and one or both of them have not acknowledged the other option! It is more likely that each was simply responding to the situation at hand without trying to offer
a comprehensive treatment of the topic.\textsuperscript{55} As a result, many Christians have added other exceptional circumstances when divorce could perhaps be justified: repeated physical abuse, prolonged addictions with no willingness to seek help to overcome them, life imprisonment without possibility of parole, irreversible mental illness, and so on.\textsuperscript{56} Since the Bible does not explicitly address any of these situations, it seems better not to create lists of additional exceptions beforehand but adopt a case-by-case approach.

I have never heard any portion of 1 Corinthians 7 read at a wedding. Some parts of it no doubt have been used somewhere, but Paul’s seemingly negative approach to marriage makes it natural for most people to avoid it in the context of a wedding ceremony. Part or all of Ephesians 5:21–33, however, is certainly one of the most frequently read passages at weddings. In the last century of evangelical preaching, a disproportionate amount of attention has been given to Paul’s commands to the wife to submit to her husband and not nearly as much to the husband’s responsibility to love his wife as Christ loved the church. When one studies the standard privileges granted to Jewish husbands and fathers and the enormously sweeping freedoms given the Roman paterfamilias, what stands out as countercultural in this passage are hardly the commands to the wives. No one would have batted an eye at them. What was radical, even shocking, was the picture of the self-giving love required of the husband, compared to Jesus giving up every privilege He had in order to die for the sins of the world.\textsuperscript{57}

Of course, a husband cannot atone for the sins of his wife; only Jesus can do that. But apart from this one difference, the comparison Paul makes is simply stunning. Husbands must love their wives by giving themselves up, by doing that which will help their wives become more holy, in order to present them to God with as spotless and blameless a character as possible (vv. 25–27). Husbands must love their wives as they typically do their own bodies, caring for their various physical and mental needs (v. 28a). Paul is not considering the pathological masochist here but normal human behavior! In fact, when one sacrificially loves one’s spouse, one is loving oneself because husband and wife have become one flesh (v. 28b).\textsuperscript{58} More practically, if your spouse isn’t happy, you aren’t going to be happy either, so it is important to care for each other’s needs. Philippians 2:3–4 generalizes from the marriage relationship to Christian friendships: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interest but each of you to the interests of the others.”\textsuperscript{59}

Much has been argued in these biblical texts about privilege in marriage,
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but Paul is not speaking about privilege at all in these texts! He is speaking about responsibilities to sacrifice self for the sake of the other. If the husband has some unique role, it is to do what is in the best interest of his wife and to lay his desires aside if the two cannot come to agreement. If the wife has some unique role, it is to submit herself to her husband. The last clause in verse 22 is cryptic, reading literally just “as to the Lord.” The parallel passage in Colossians 3:18 sheds some light on Paul’s probable meaning, with its expanded qualifier, “as is fitting in the Lord.” Wives must never submit to their husbands (nor must Christians in general ever submit to human authorities) when they are asked to do something that contravenes God’s expressed will. The numerous examples of civil disobedience throughout Scripture clearly demonstrate this—from the midwives in Moses’s day refusing to kill Hebrew babies (Ex. 1:15–20), to Daniel refusing to worship Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4), to Peter and the apostles refusing to obey the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:29). No wife may ever take refuge in the kind of logic that alleges that if she simply obeys her husband in everything, God will judge the husband for any sins he commits but let the wife off the hook. The death of Sapphira for agreeing with her husband Ananias in lying about how much property they sold (Acts 5:8–10) clearly demonstrates that point.

First Peter 3:1–7 is the last major passage on marriage that merits brief comment in our survey of New Testament teaching. This time the typically disproportionate amount of attention usually given to the wife’s responsibilities can at least be partially justified by the fact that six of the seven verses are addressed to her. But verse 7 is a long and detailed verse of the husband’s responsibilities and dare not be neglected. The passage begins envisioning what were no doubt common situations in the provinces to which 1 Peter was addressed (see 1:1), where the wife in a pagan marriage had become a believer but the husband hadn’t. The only explicit motive for submission in this passage is an evangelistic one (3:1). In a culture where women were expected to defer to their husbands in a broad range of contexts, Christianity would never commend itself to the unsaved by flaunting these expectations.

The main point in Peter’s instruction to wives is actually not about submission at all. The dominant principle of verses 2–6 is that women should focus on a godly character rather than outward adornment to model true beauty. Some problems haven’t changed in centuries and the problem is by no means limited to women! When Peter refers to Sarah as a model of the submission, and even obedience, of godly women of old to their husbands, he cites the only place in Genesis where she ever utters the word “master” (or “lord”)—
Gen. 18:12—and that comes in the same context in which she is laughing at the idea of having a child in their old age. The main thrust again lies not in the submission or the obedience but in the fact that she did “what was right” and did “not give way to fear” (v. 6b). The Greek says, cryptically, “do not fear their ptoēsin.” Ptoēsis (the root form) can mean “terrifying, intimidation,” or “fear, terror.” The Common English Bible may capture the sense with its rendering “and don’t respond to their threats with fear.” In other words, just as in Colossians, Peter is reminding wives not to be afraid of the ways in which a non-Christian husband can hurt them even if they remain faithful to Christ. But verse 9 also tells people to return evil with blessing, and enabling an abuser is not blessing them. Jesus Himself fled hostility every time He encountered it except at the very end when He knew He had to die by crucifixion. So no Christian wife (or husband) should ever subject themselves to repeated violence if they have the opportunity to escape.

With verse 7, however, Peter presumably is including Christian husbands in his purview, since only they would necessarily be present in the churches when his epistle was read out. The text is worth reproducing in full, since it receives comparatively paltry attention. “Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.” The New American Standard Bible is more literal in the early part of the verse with its translation, “live with your wives in an understanding way.” Attempts to answer the question “understanding what?” probably overly narrow Peter’s focus. Husbands should understand as much as possible about their wives to live as considerately as possible with them. “The weaker partner” is literally “weaker vessel.” A majority of commentators think Peter is focusing on the generalization that women in the ancient world were typically weaker physically than men. But except for the pampered lives of the tiny minority of wealthy women, the daily existence of most people, both men and women, in the ancient Mediterranean world was rugged enough to make this interpretation uncertain (cf. Prov. 31). Possibly more likely is the approach that understands the weakness to refer to greater vulnerability, now that Peter has commanded the wives to submit to their husbands. Husbands must in no way take advantage of that gracious choice on the part of their wives.

More liberal scholars love to point out the various people throughout church history who have claimed women were ontologically or inherently inferior to men, and skeptics love to claim that such a view is inseparable from Christian and biblical teaching. But Genesis 1:27 unequivocally declares
both man and woman to be created equally in God’s image, which does not allow for any inherent superiority or inferiority. So, too, here, Peter stresses that husbands and wives are co-heirs of eternal life. There is not one whit of our eternal happiness that one gender can claim more than the other. In this life, therefore, husbands must respect and honor (from aponemô) their wives by their behavior. If they don’t, their prayers may be hindered. Put bluntly, if husbands don’t treat their wives with deference and respect, they dare not count on God to pay much attention to them when they are praying!

It is easy to look back over a long life and play down the hard times while magnifying the “glory days.” As of this writing, my wife and I have been married over thirty-eight years. There has never been a time when I have seriously worried about her leaving me, nor to my knowledge one when she feared me leaving her. We have had some struggles, common to most intimate, long-term relationships, but I can honestly say that overall marriage has not been hard but rather very joyful and rewarding. Every five years a solid core of more than thirty men and women who formed part of the Campus Crusade for Christ chapter on my undergraduate campus gather, often with their spouses if they are married, for a reunion hosted by our former director and his wife at their home not far from our college. When we met in 2016 for our fortieth-year reunion, only three had been divorced. Everyone else who had married (which was most of them) was still married to their original partners. A few had struggled considerably, but many would have cited issues with grown children as far more challenging situations to deal with than issues with each other. Overall, virtually everyone said the Christian model for marriage was proper, fulfilling, and ultimately well worth it. And ours was the generation that pioneered the sexual revolution!

CONCLUSION

Marriage should not be entered into unadvisedly or lightly. Many people should not get married as quickly as they do; some who do marry should not have gotten married at all. Singles should be encouraged to pray seriously to see if God might be calling them to remain single, and celibate, for the sake of serving Christ and His kingdom more wholeheartedly. Even those who do marry are often not truly ready to consider marriage until they have become content with singleness as a fulfilling lifestyle. Otherwise, they tend to look to their spouse to make up for their own deficiencies, which rarely leads to a successful marriage. One has to be able to serve one’s spouse, content with
one’s own identity and gifting. In marriage, as in other matters in life, it is better to give than to receive (Acts 20:35).

A God-pleasing marriage, then, is one in which the husband and wife are each dedicated to the other’s well-being, and one that pledges “till death do us part” and remains faithful to that pledge. True, there are exceptional circumstances in which divorce and remarriage are permitted—in the cases of adultery or abandonment. Potentially, following a process of case-by-case discernment, there may be a very limited number of other situations as well. God’s desire nevertheless remains that a husband and wife become each other’s most intimate friends to whom they give more loyalty than they do to any other human being. And that requires a commitment to permanence and to consistently putting the other’s interests above one’s own. When a couple shares this commitment, no matter how often they fail, the result can be one of deep gratitude, contentment, joy, and security.

CONTINUING INSIGHT

KEYS TO PREMARITAL TRAINING

Greg Smalley

I’ve heard that after the age of eighteen, some of the best opportunities for people to come to Christ are during major life events—marriage, birth, and death. When people get married, have a child, or lose a loved one, they often tend to start thinking about faith. This is why helping engaged couples prepare for marriage can be one of the top producers of evangelism and is a great time to connect young families into the church.

Sadly, I’ve heard many leaders in our churches say, “Why bother? Younger engaged couples are too idealistic to truly benefit from premarital training—and they’re absorbed in planning the big day. Or, if they’re a blending couple, they’re so focused on helping their children adjust that they’re not thinking about their own relationship.” These are valid concerns; however, I think one of the best reasons to work with engaged couples is to give them a great experience
at your church, expose them to needed relational skills, and pair them with mentor couples. These experiences increase the likelihood that they’ll reach out when they go through hard times as a couple, as they inevitably will—you’re seeding the importance of marriage enrichment, and you’re helping them build relationships with people who will walk with them through the highs and lows of marriage and life.

My wife, Erin, and I just celebrated our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. One of our biggest regrets is that we didn’t do more premarital training. I was arrogant at twenty-three. I thought that since I grew up in the home of well-known relationship expert Gary Smalley and was getting my master’s degree in counseling, I knew it all, and we didn’t need any preparation! Certainly, I reasoned, our marriage would be a cakewalk—the kind that would lead to people writing poems or songs about our love.

Boy, was I wrong! Honestly, we really struggled during the first three years of marriage because, among other things, we didn’t have the right skills to manage our conflict—something that a good premarital program would have taught us. A few years ago, I actually found the assessment that we took in 1992—three months before our wedding. We laughed hysterically as the report “strongly suggested” that we would struggle working through conflict. This is why I’m so passionate about premarital training. It would have made a huge difference in the early years of our marriage because it works!

Research conclusively shows that couples who succeed gain the knowledge and skills they need before they settle into destructive patterns that often lead to divorce. In fact, you’re 30 percent less likely to get divorced if you get some sort of premarital training before you marry. Another study by marriage expert Dr. David Olson reports that 80 percent of the couples who did premarital training report higher marital satisfaction.

So, what’s the secret to a thriving premarital ministry? What kind of knowledge and skills are necessary for couples to learn?

SEVEN KEYS TO A GREAT PREMARITAL PROGRAM

Don’t discourage your engaged couples

We often give newly engaged couples a confusing message. On one hand, we are excited and congratulate them. “I’m thrilled for you guys!” And then we decide that to be responsible we need to inject a sense of reality into their
starry-eyed outlook by saying things like: *Marriage is really hard work. Things will change after you get married. The first year will be the most difficult.*

Worse, our culture constantly devalues marriage through subtle and not-so-subtle messages. Just do a simple online search for marriage jokes and see what pops up: “I love being married. It’s so great to find that one special person you want to annoy for the rest of your life.”

It’s no wonder our young couples might feel ambivalent: “We’re excited, but what have we done?”

Don’t misunderstand me. We need to prepare couples for lifelong marriages, but we don’t need to discourage them in the process. Keep your words uplifting and positive as you teach them the skills needed for a successful marriage. We don’t want to send mixed messages about marriage. Instead of, “Sure, God has created something amazing, but once you walk down the aisle, you’re about to go through the most miserable year of your life,” say this: “Marriage is an amazing journey.” Think about it. God created something so incredible that its value is hard to put into words. I wonder if this was what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote that marriage is a “profound mystery” (Eph. 5:31–32 NIV). It’s almost unfathomable to fully grasp the mystery of how God designed a man and a woman to be joined together as one.

Marriage is not only a great mystery, but it’s also a great adventure. Next to loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, your marriage will be the greatest adventure of your life. Throughout your journey, you will have incredible times together—countless moments filled with love, friendship, passion, laughter, safety, fun, unity, joy, and security. You will face hardships—times that you feel disappointed, hurt, sad, angry, disconnected, upset, frustrated, and lonely. Any journey will have highs and lows. But this is the beauty and the mystery of marriage. Embrace all that’s true about marriage—the incredible times and the hardships. You will experience it all, and this is a great thing because God will use every season of your marriage to His glorification and for your benefit. That is the promise you can carry with you on your adventure together. God is always with you, and He is always fighting for your marriage.

When working with a church marriage ministry or when I’m doing a training with marriage mentors, I encourage them to tell their engaged couples not to let anyone dampen or crush their excitement. I want these couples to be thrilled with their choice. We need to cheer on their decision to get married and to buck the cultural trend that pulls for cohabitation over marriage.

Current research shows that the marriage rate in the US has hit a record
low and many couples are choosing to live together and have children outside of marriage. According to the 2015 US Wedding Forecast from Demographic Intelligence, millennials in the next five years will have more of its members at a typical marrying age than any previous generation. But they are also less likely to tie the knot than their predecessors.

Thus, we need to celebrate their choice to honor what God created and gifted to us. We need to send a very clear message to engaged couples:

You’re getting married! You’re entering into one of the most sacred relationships ever created by God. He thinks so highly of marriage that He opens the Bible with a marriage. God uses marriage to describe His relationship with the Israelites and Christ’s relationship with the church. And He ends the Bible with a wedding celebration.

Marriage is not only a big deal, but it’s an amazing thing as well. Sure, God will use your marriage to help you to become more like Christ. But don’t lose sight of the amazing feeling of being married. There are well-meaning people who will try to beat you down and rob you of your excitement. They’ll tell you how hard marriage is or toss out divorce statistics. Don’t be disheartened. You get to write your own story regardless of what might have happened to the marriages of those close to you.

Our culture will continue to devalue marriage, and many others will forgo marriage and choose instead to cohabitate. But this is not what God wants. His desire is that “Marriage should be honored by all” (Heb. 13:4). One of the greatest ways to honor your marriage is to remain overjoyed about your upcoming marriage. Don’t let go of your dream for a lifelong, passionate marriage. You and your spouse go with God . . . that’s a powerful force. We want to join you as well. We want to help you get the marriage you’ve always dreamed of.

Understand God’s purpose for marriage

One way of helping couples guard their future marriage is to show them God’s purpose for marriage. First, marriage was God’s idea, not ours, and it is a lifelong covenant with Him. “What God has joined together, let no one separate” (Matt. 19:6 NIV, emphasis added).

Encourage couples to remove the word “divorce” from their vocabulary. When hard times hit, our only choice should be to press forward and get help. Retreat is easy when it’s an option! Help them remember that marriage isn’t always about individual gratification or the pursuit of happiness. In the
excellent book *Sacred Marriage*, Gary Thomas poses this question: “What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy?” Although marriage does bring great joy, the purpose in marriage isn’t ultimately to make each other happy. God’s true purpose is to mold each each of His children into the image of His Son.

And yes, God also created marriage for us to thoroughly enjoy. “May you rejoice in the wife of your youth. . . . may you ever be intoxicated with her love” (Prov. 5:18–19 niv). God also unites couples to do together what they could never do alone. Thus, your marriage has to be about serving and blessing others—blessed to be a blessing. If you’re living with confidence in the Lord, you will be a blessing to others. You will be “like trees planted along a riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water. Such trees are not bothered by the heat or worried by long months of drought. Their leaves stay green, and they never stop producing fruit” (Jer. 17:8 NLT).

**Manage conflict in healthy ways**

Many couples avoid conflict like the plague, but we need to teach engaged couples that the sign of a healthy marriage is not the absence of conflict, but how couples manage their conflict when it comes—as it will. Research consistently shows that one of the best predictors for marital success is when couples work through their problems in a healthy way. Because many patterns of behavior are laid in the first year of marriage, it is especially important to address handling of disagreements in premarital preparation. We need to remind couples of James’s advice: When troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity . . . ” (1:2 NLT). Conflict is always an “opportunity”—an opportunity to learn something about yourself, your spouse, and your marriage. Thus, view conflict as a gift instead of something that should be eliminated or avoided. Conflict, when handled in a healthy manner, can be the doorway to intimacy and can actually strengthen a marriage.

**Proactively invest in your marriage**

One of the main factors people cite as a reason for their divorce is a slow fade. There wasn’t an obvious problem—the couple’s love simply grew cold as they grew apart. French author André Maurois wrote, “A successful marriage is an edifice that must be rebuilt every day.” He was right on the mark. Marriage is a lifelong process that we must commit ourselves to again and again.

Love requires action. The key is to teach premarital couples the value of continuing to invest in their marriage and equipping them with practical ways
to make daily investments in each other and their marriage. Pursuing a shared spiritual relationship, having sex often in a way that you both like, going on a weekly date night are ways to invest in marriage that reap great benefits. Advise your couples to commit to regular conversations when they talk about their inner life—feelings, likes, hopes and dreams—instead of merely administering their relationship (discussing schedules, to-do lists, and finances).

Marriage expert David Mace wrote, “One of the great illusions of our time is that love is self-sustaining. It is not. Love must be fed and nurtured, constantly renewed. That demands ingenuity and consideration, but first and foremost, it demands time.”

**Protect Your Unity**

I’ve heard that it takes the average couple about nine to fourteen years for the two to stop thinking about themselves as “individuals” and to start thinking about themselves as “one”—to go from “me” to “we.” It shouldn’t be surprising that the average length of a marriage that ends in divorce is eight years. I imagine these divorcing couples never learned how to protect their oneness.

Our “oneness” is the superpower in marriage. God unites couples to do together what they could never do alone. When a couple is unified they can accomplish impossible feats. However, we have an adversary against us and against our marriage—our oneness will always be under attack (1 Peter 5:8). It’s critical that we help our engaged couples learn to protect their unity. Encourage them to understand that they are not adversaries and should never think of themselves that way—because they are on the same team.

**Commit to being a healthy individual**

One of the stranger mathematical concepts to grasp is that two negatives make a positive. Honestly, to this day, I’m not even sure why this is true. But unlike in math, this same logic doesn’t work within a marriage. One of the greatest truths that I’ve learned about relationships is that two unhealthy individuals will never make a healthy marriage. A successful marriage requires maturity; immaturity is why many marriages fail. Both people have to be committed to personal growth and development.

Single men and single women often ask me what are some vital character qualities needed for a great marriage. One of the most important is teachability. This is when a person is capable of being instructed, trained, and coached by God, a mentor, and their future spouse. God calls this process of personal refinement *sanctification*, or becoming like Christ. When we’re in Christ,
we “are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18 niv).

One of the greatest gifts we can ever give our spouse and marriage is a lifelong commitment to pursue personal maturity. I know that I will never reach perfection in this life and that I will always be dealing with my faults and sin nature. But I will continue to press forward and pursue Christlikeness: “So that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ . . .” (Eph. 4:14–15 esv).

As my wife and I recently celebrated a milestone anniversary, one of the lines that I wrote in my card to Erin was, “Thank you for faithfully standing by my side as God continues to refine me.” You see, part of our marriage story is how God continuously upgrades us as individuals and how He uses this maturing process to strengthen our marriage. At the same time, God uses our marriage to grow each of us as well. I love how King Solomon so eloquently put it: “Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed” (Eccl. 4:9 nlt).

It takes a village . . . to keep a marriage strong!

One of the greatest truths I’ve learned is that it takes a “village to keep a marriage strong.” Even the healthiest relationships go through conflict, disappointment, temptation, and difficult times. And it’s in these dark moments or painful seasons that Satan will do everything within his power to isolate you and keep you suffering alone. But a “cord of three strands is not quickly broken” (Eccl. 4:12 niv). We need community when our marriage is tested.

This is the moment that our loved ones, who vowed to support and fight for our marriage, can make the difference between relationship life and death. Thus, we need to help premarital couples be intentional about regularly connecting with other like-minded couples, both those who are around the same age and those who are more seasoned, further down the road than they are. This community involves both give and take. Spouses who share a healthy, vibrant relationship rely on their support system, but they also recognize that they have a responsibility to help other couples thrive—“as iron sharpens iron” (Prov. 27:17).
MARRIAGE

These seven points are key to include in your premarital program. Other important topics a good premarital program should include:

- How to “leave and cleave”
- Dealing with family-of-origin issues
- Finances and budgeting
- Creating realistic expectations
- Understanding biblical roles in marriage

Ideally, premarital training should be broken into a ten-session format lasting one to two hours long (research suggests that eight to ten hours total is the ideal). This could be accomplished by using both an individual and group (five couples at the most) format. The training should also include an assessment.5

As you equip premarital couples, you are investing in their future marriage and the future of your congregation. The benefits are endless.

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24 esv). Wise words and words of great joy.