

A VOW TO LOVE

A VOW TO LOVE

*A Biblical explanation of the
Form for the Solemnization of Marriage*

by

Clarence Bouwman

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A Vow to Love

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To my bride

With love and deep gratitude
for all God has given me in you

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

For so many of us, the *Form for the Solemnization of Marriage* (hereafter the 'Marriage Form' or simply 'Form') has a very unique significance. Its words were read on our wedding day, and we voiced (perhaps with eagerness, perhaps with trepidation) its prescribed "*I do*" to its loaded questions. Since that memorable day of long ago (or not so long ago), we've learned in the hard school of life that living within holy wedlock is not as simple as we may have thought. What should being a husband actually look like in the rough and tumble of this broken life? Is 'headship' not an antiquated model? And what should being a godly wife actually look like? Must she really be 'submissive' to her husband? What, for that matter, is the role of sex within marriage, now that sexuality has been explored and the children have come along?

Others of us, particularly the young, search and perhaps keep searching for a potential marriage partner. But what should we seek in such a partner? What is marriage really all about? How can one prepare for marriage? What ought one to do with sexuality before marriage?

Again, some of us are perhaps content to go through life alone. We've seen too much pain come from the 'holy state of marriage', and now want no part of it. A relationship without commitment seems the preferable way to go. Yet is a relationship without commitment an option the Lord allows in His Word? Or is it acceptable to have a 'marriage' relationship with a person of the same gender?

As it turns out, the Form has summarized in brief what the Holy Scriptures say in answer to questions as these. That makes a journey through the Marriage Form distinctly profitable, for the married and for the single, for the young and the not so young. There are no answers better than those given by life's Creator.

The present book arises from the material I compiled as a result of teaching a post-confession class on the Marriage Form. I take the opportunity here to thank sincerely the elders of the Canadian Reformed Church of Yarrow for their encouragement in initiating, teaching and finalizing this project. Those who attended the post-confession class formed a very keen and stimulating audience; through their interest and questions I was driven again and again to seek the answers of God in Scripture to the questions that come up from the Form. Your encouragement and enthusiasm was invaluable!

As I struggled with getting this material together into one cohesive

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whole, I received valuable input from DongWoo Oh, which I cheerfully acknowledge here. Revs B.J. Berends and W.W.J. vanOene also contributed their insights to aspects of the book. Jolene van Dijk took on herself the editor's job, and also compiled the indices. Thank you all so very much.

Now that the project is complete, I continue my prayer that the Lord will bless the work that's here offered to the public. Marriage plays such a central role in God's plan for the world and in His church-gathering work today. Tomorrow's couples shall learn what marriage is all about primarily from the example they see around them, and in today's western world that example is often so pathetic. May the Lord God grant that through reading and studying the Marriage Form many marriages are strengthened, so that today's youth receive the encouragement and stimulation they need to enter the holy state of marriage themselves in a manner that glorifies the Lord God.

To help encourage study and discussion of this material, I have appended questions and discussion points to each chapter. Some of these questions are appropriate for a group setting, while others are better suited for a private discussion with one's spouse. Some are intended for couples before they marry, while others obviously belong within marriage. I have left the questions mixed together so that readers can use their own discretion as to who should engage which questions and when.

Chilliwack, BC
June 2008

CHAPTER ONE

Why Discuss a Marriage Form?

Our society acts as if God does not exist. If there is no God, the institution of marriage can obviously not come from God. Instead, the institution of marriage can be nothing other than a human tradition – which can therefore be discarded as new times and new expectations require.

Consider: by what law of nature can you insist that sexual relations must be confined to marriage? By what law of nature can you insist that marriage is even necessary? By what law of nature can you insist that marriage must be between two people and not three or four? What law of nature dictates that a man must marry a woman, and not another man – or, for that matter, his pet? On what natural principle can you insist that the man must be the head in marriage, and the wife his helper? My point is this: since the existence of Almighty God is denied in our postmodern society, there can be no ultimate right or wrong. Marriage as it has traditionally been understood has lost its foundation, and even its *raison d'être*. In today's culture there is something quite logical and predictable about governments changing the traditional definition of marriage as involving a man and a woman, and now defining marriage as "the lawful union of two persons to the exclusion of all others," as Canada did in 2005. It is also quite logical and predicable that this new definition of marriage will not last.

Behind this development is the spiritual warfare the Lord has spoken about in His Word. The struggle, says the Holy Spirit through Paul, "*is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms*" (Ephesians 6:12). Satan is desperate to destroy the church of

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Jesus Christ. Yet it is primarily through the family that the ascended Christ gathers His church. So the guns of the evil one are set on the family, and hence on the institution of marriage.

For this reason the answer to today's attack on the institution of marriage is ultimately not better laws from the government (as if the problem is political at heart) or the appointment of judges who will protect marriage (as if the problem is judicial at heart). The problem is spiritual, and therefore the battle must be engaged on the spiritual level. The reality of God's existence needs to be taken seriously first of all in the boardrooms and bedrooms of the nation, and God's revelation in Scripture studied humbly and applied faithfully. By definition this cannot happen at a national or provincial level until it has happened at the local, individual level. The defense of marriage begins with individual citizens submitting to the authority of the Maker of marriage, and then living from His norms for marriage both within as well as outside of the married state.

Yet Christians of the western world cannot even assume that all Christians are reading from the same page. Several mainline churches throughout North America have already acquiesced to new views of marriage, and so tolerate –and even sanction– same-sex marriages. The battle, then, cannot be drawn with the church-going population fighting on the one side, against an unbelieving enemy on the other. The Christian population of our day is itself divided on the subject of hermeneutics, the science of how one reads the Bible. For that reason I want to make it clear at the outset that I consider the Bible to be God's clear and infallible revelation to man, as the church has traditionally explained the concept in Articles 3-7 of the *Belgic Confession*.¹ In the pages that follow I seek simply to listen to what God has revealed in Holy Scripture about marriage and married life.

The battle is spiritual – and does not pass by those who take God's Word seriously. Not only in society at large, but also amongst our country's church-going population one sees more marriage break-ups than in years gone by. One sees a decline in the sizes of our families, sees husbands not carrying out their task as the head of the family, and sees wives not being willing to submit to their husbands. It is so predictable: we are touched by the society in which we live. For that very reason work must be done first of all amongst Christians, so that marriages of today and of tomorrow are strengthened – and our marriages made a model and a blessing for the nation in which we live.

Yet tomorrow's marriages shall not be strong if today's youth grow up in homes where the holy state of marriage is not respected and maintained. Hours upon hours of premarital instruction will not make straight the damage done when parents failed to model for the next generation what a Godly marriage actually looks like. As beneficial as a premarital course may be, I'm con-

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vinced the problem needs to be tackled a step earlier in the piece. Specifically, the home wherein tomorrow's bride and groom are today living needs to be taught what God says about marriage. The parents of tomorrow's bridegroom and bride need the guidance of an open Bible as they model for their children what God wants marriage to be. This book is written with an eye first of all to these parents.

**"TOMORROW'S MARRIAGES SHALL NOT BE STRONG
IF TODAY'S YOUTH GROW UP IN HOMES WHERE
THE HOLY STATE OF MARRIAGE IS NOT RESPECTED
AND MAINTAINED."**

Again, it is not just the parents of tomorrow's bridegroom and bride that can do with a refresher on marriage. The apostle Paul instructs Titus to instruct the older women to *"train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God"* (Titus 2:4,5). To carry out this mandate, these older sisters of the congregation obviously need to know what the Lord God has revealed in His word about the place of the woman in marriage and in the home – to say nothing of self-control and purity. Older men, of course, have a parallel role in relation to the younger men of the congregation. They too can do with reading (again) what the Lord God says about marriage.

And, of course, the couple that under God's blessing looks forward to marrying in the Lord will certainly do well to acquaint themselves with what God has said about marriage. In fact, as they prepare to exchange vows according to the traditional Christian pattern as learned from Scripture, reading and discussing a historically tested Form for the Solemnization of Marriage can prepare them well for their big day.

The Form

Before we go any further, it may be good to read together the Form for the Solemnization of Marriage² that will be discussed in the following pages of this publication. I take the liberty to reprint it below.

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The consistory announces that _____ and _____ have indicated their intention to enter into the married state, according to the ordinance of God. They desire to begin this holy state in the Name of the Lord and to complete it to His glory. If no lawful objection is brought forward, the ceremony will take place, the Lord willing, on ...

Announcement

_____ and _____, since the consistory has duly made known to the congregation your desire to enter into the married state, and no lawful objection has been presented, we may now proceed to the solemnization of your marriage in the Name of the Lord.

Introduction

Let us first listen to a summary of what the Word of God teaches us about marriage. We find there that marriage is an institution of God which pleases Him, and must therefore be held in honor among all. After God our Father made heaven and earth, He created man in His own image. *The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said,*

The Institution of Marriage

Hebrews 13:4
Genesis 1:27
Genesis 2:18-24

*"This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called 'woman,'
for she was taken out of man."*

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. We therefore believe that the LORD also today gives husband and wife to one another. Since they are united by His hand, nothing shall separate them in this life.

Also, our Lord Jesus Christ honored marriage when He revealed His glory at the marriage feast at Cana. He teaches us that marriage is an institution of God and should not be

John 2:1-11

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broken, when He says, *Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.*

Matthew 19:6

Since God has made marriage such a strong bond, He hates divorce, as also our Lord Jesus Christ shows in these words: *I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.*

Malachi 2:16
Matthew 19:9

As the Lord forbids immorality *each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband*, so that our bodies may be preserved as temples of the Holy Spirit and we may glorify God in our bodies.

1 Corinthians 7:2
1 Corinthians 6:19,20

The apostle Paul teaches us that the unity of husband and wife in marriage is a profound mystery, reflecting the relationship between Christ and His church. As Christ is the Head of the church, so the husband is the head of his wife. Christ loved His church to the end, and gave Himself up for her, that she might be holy and without blemish; likewise the husband shall love his wife as his own body, take care of her, and cherish her. As the church is subject to Christ, so the wife shall be subject in everything to her husband, respect him, and entrust herself to his loving care, following the example of godly women who trusted in God and were subject to their husbands.

The Profound Mystery
Ephesians 5:22-33

John 13:1

1 Peter 3:5

Husband and wife shall assist each other in all good things, heartily forgiving one another their sins and shortcomings. United in love, they will more and more reflect in their marriage the unity of Christ and His church.

Although it is true, as the apostle says, that those who marry will face trouble in this state and because of sin will experience many difficulties and afflictions, yet they may also believe the promise of God that they, as heirs of the grace of life, will always receive His aid and protection, even when they least expect it.

1 Corinthians 7:28

The Word of God also teaches us about the purpose of marriage.

The Purpose of Marriage

First, husband and wife shall live together in sincere love and holiness, helping each other faithfully in all things that belong to this life and to the life to come.

Second, by marriage the human race is to be continued and increased, and, under the blessing of God, husband and wife will be fruitful and multiply. If it pleases God to give them children, they shall nurture these children in the true knowledge and fear of the Lord.

Genesis 1:28

Ephesians 6:4

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(The minister shall ask them to rise.)

Bridegroom and bride, hear from the Word of God what the Lord requires of you in marriage.

Bridegroom, know that God has set you to be the head of your wife. You shall love her as your own body, as Christ loved His church and gave Himself up for her. Guide, protect, and comfort your wife. Live with her wisely and honour her, because she is an heir to eternal life together with you; then your prayers will not be hindered. Work faithfully in your daily calling, that you may support your family and also help those in need.

Bride, you shall love your husband and be subject to him, as the church is subject to Christ. Accept his guidance and assist him in all good things. Take proper care of your family and household, and live modestly, in faith, love, and holiness.

Assist each other always and be faithful to each other. Diligently fulfil the calling which the Lord has given you in the church and in this world. Believe God's sure promise, *Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in his ways. You will eat the fruit of your labor; blessings and prosperity will be yours.*

_____ and _____, you have now heard what the Lord requires of you and what He has promised you. May our gracious God give you the strength and the faithfulness to live together as husband and wife in this manner and may your help be in the Name of the LORD who made heaven and earth.

(Minister: Will you now join right hands?)

(To the bridegroom:)

_____, do you declare here before the Lord and these witnesses that you take as your lawful wife _____, here present? Do you promise to love and guide her faithfully, to maintain her, and to live with her in holiness, according to the holy gospel? Do you also promise never to forsake her, but to be true to her always, in good days and bad, in riches and poverty, in health and sickness, for as long as you both shall live?

What is your answer?

The Duties of Marriage

1 Peter 3:7

Ephesians 4:28

Psalms 128:1,2

Psalms 124:8

The Marriage Vows

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I do.

Answer

(To the bride:)

_____, do you declare here before the Lord and these witnesses that you take as your lawful husband _____, here present? Do you promise to love and obey him, to assist him, and to live with him in holiness, according to the holy gospel? Do you also promise never to forsake him, but to be true to him always, in good days and bad, in riches and poverty, in health and sickness, for as long as you both shall live?

What is your answer?

I do.

Answer

(Minister:) I now pronounce you husband and wife. The Father of all mercies, who by His grace called you to this holy state of marriage, bind you together in true love and faithfulness, and grant you His blessing. Amen.

Pronouncement

Bridegroom and bride, since we cannot expect anything from ourselves, you shall kneel before the Lord and we shall pray with you and for you that He may enable you to fulfil your vows and grant you His blessing.

Almighty and heavenly Father, You have said from the beginning that man should not be alone. We thank and praise You that You have given this brother and sister to each other in marriage, that they may be one.

Intercession

We pray You, grant them Your Holy Spirit that they may live together according to Your will in true faith. Help them to resist the power of sin, and to live in holiness before You. Lift up Your countenance upon them, and guide them in prosperity and adversity by Your fatherly hand. Grant them Your blessing according to the covenant promises given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. If it should please You to give them children, confirm Your covenant to them and to their seed; and grant that they may nurture these children in the fear of the Lord, to the glory of Your Name, and to the edification of the church.

Let them live in communion with Your Son Jesus Christ, in the harmony of true love, and to the benefit of their neighbour. Cause them to look forward with all the church

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to the great day of the marriage feast of the Lamb.

Hear us, merciful Father, for the sake of Jesus Christ,
Your beloved Son, who with You and the Holy Spirit, the
only true God, lives and reigns for ever, Amen.

(Or add:

*Our Father in heaven
Hallowed be your name,
Your kingdom come,
Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our
debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from
the evil one,
for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory
forever. Amen)*

Brother and sister _____, our Lord God bless
you richly and grant you a long and holy life together in all
godliness, love, and unity. Amen.

Benediction

Background to the Form

One notices right away from the texts listed in the right hand column that this Form works much with Holy Scripture. Why, we wonder, does it do so? Where, for that matter, does this Form come from? What authority does this Form have today? Can we be confident that this Form can in fact help today's people? A quick look into its background will help us to some answers.

In the course of the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church saw fit to declare marriage a *sacrament* – something the church had not done in the many centuries since the days of Christ's ascension into heaven. The term sacrament in relation to marriage comes from Ephesians 5:32 where the apostle Paul spoke of marriage as "*a great mystery*". In the Latin translation of the Bible used in the Roman Catholic Church of the time, the word 'mystery' was translated as 'sacrament.' On the basis of this translation, the Roman Catholic Church found room to declare the institution of marriage a sacrament. Since sacraments are means of grace (see Lord's Day 25 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*), the Roman Catholic Church taught its members that a spiritual benefit came through marriage. This in turn meant that in the Roman Catholic Church all marriages required the involvement and blessing of the priest.

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Despite this requirement of the church, there were many in the Middle Ages who did not have their marriage solemnized by the church; a man and a woman moved in together and had a *de facto* marriage. The Roman Catholic Church replied that it was not solemnization itself that made marriage a real marriage but rather its consummation (ie, sexual intercourse, or ‘carnal knowledge’, in older English). The logical extension of this position was that all who had sexual relations with another were in fact considered married; marriage was defined in terms of sexuality.

In the Great Reformation of the sixteenth century, the Reformers opposed the Roman Catholic notion that marriage was a sacrament. Men as Luther and Calvin resisted this notion on grounds that the Bible nowhere says that marriage is a means of grace. The Reformers also discarded the notion that ‘carnal knowledge’ is the equivalent of marriage. They opened the Scriptures and sought to learn from God’s revelation what He had to say about marriage. Given that the teachings of the church had planted so many wrong perceptions about marriage in the minds of the people, the Reformers also realized that they had to instruct the people in what God teaches in His Word concerning marriage.

So as early as 1533 the first Biblically based Marriage Form saw the light of day. This Form was written by William Farel, and was later adopted in unaltered form by John Calvin. Characteristic of this form was its attempt to teach the hearers what the Lord God revealed in Scripture about His gift of marriage.

**“A BIBLICALLY FOUNDED MARRIAGE FORM WAS MADE
AVAILABLE AS A TEACHING TOOL FOR THE BELIEVERS.”**

In 1566 Peter Dathenus used this material to supply a Marriage Form for the benefit of the churches in the Netherlands. Notice: this is the same decade in which the *Belgic Confession* (1561) and the *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563) were written. Guido deBres, author of the *Belgic Confession*, died a martyr’s death in the southern Netherlands in 1567, one of countless victims of persecution by a staunchly Roman Catholic government. One might think that in circumstances of such persecution there were more important matters requiring attention than preparing a Marriage Form. Yet church leaders considered Biblical instruction on the holy state of marriage to be so important that a Form for the Solemnization of Marriage was prepared for the churches before a Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons. Their thinking is understandable: husband and wife in holy marriage reflect the relation between Jesus Christ and His Church (Ephesians 5:22-33). The (non-Reformed) world

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should receive from the marriages around them an accurate perception of Christ's relation to the Church. Further, it is to Christian parents that God entrusts His children-by-covenant. Those Christian parents need to nurture these children in the fear of the Lord, and that requires a home atmosphere (including the marriage relationship) built on the revelation of God in Scripture. Small wonder that so soon in the piece a Biblically founded Marriage Form was made available as a teaching tool for the believers; at stake were the future generations of the church.

The Marriage Form released in the Netherlands in 1566 underwent some minor modifications in the years leading up to the great Synod of Dort, 1618-1619. The redaction adopted by that Synod served Reformed Churches of the Netherlands in unaltered form for some three centuries. This Form has also been translated into the English language, where it served with distinction in many second world countries. Cosmetic modifications to the Form in the Netherlands in 1933 affected the Form in use for the first three decades of the history of the Canadian Reformed Churches. In 1980 Synod Smithville of the Canadian Reformed Churches adopted the redaction discussed in this publication. Despite the changes of 1933 and 1980, this Form remains essentially the one adopted by the Synod of Dort nearly 400 years ago. It's understood that this Form has captured well what the Lord God has revealed in Scripture about the holy state of marriage. Its Scriptural faithfulness harbors the secret of the Form's authority.³

Points for Discussion:

1. Seek to understand why governments throughout the western world are changing the definition of marriage to make it gender neutral. Use Paul's words in Romans 1:18-32 to help understand what is happening in our day. On the basis of Paul's instruction in this passage, what trends can we expect to see in future years? Why is this not a cause for anxiety?
2. In what way is a redefinition of marriage a threat to a) the church, b) society, c) your marriage d) your children's marriage?
3. Why is a Biblically faithful manner of reading the Bible critical for a good understanding of marriage? Read and discuss in this context Articles 3-7 of the *Belgic Confession*, paying particular attention to Articles 5 and 7.
4. Do some research to determine how those who promote female office bearers in church justify their stand from Scripture. Do the same in relation to those who defend same-sex marriage. What lesson can we learn about how we are to read the Bible?

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5. How important are your experiences and/or preferences in a study on the Marriage Form? Explain your answer.
6. Why did the fathers supply for the churches a Form for the Solemnization of Marriage in the time they did? Given that marriage is under severe attack in our day, what signal does this action on their part give to us in defending marriage?

¹ See further C. Bouwman, *The Overflowing Riches of my God*, Armadale: Pro Ecclesia, 2008, pg 59-101.

² The text here printed is the edition as it has been revised by Synod Smithers of the Canadian Reformed Churches in 2007. This edition will appear in subsequent reprints of the *Book of Praise* (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 1984). It differs from previous editions only in that Synod Smithers 2007 replaced the Bible quotations with those from the *New International Version*.

³ For more information on the background and development of the Marriage Form, the reader is referred to Rev G. vanRongen, *Our Reformed Church Service Book* (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1995), pages 227-236.

CHAPTER TWO

Marriage

"In the Name of the Lord"

As a thread of gold, the phrase "*in the Name of the Lord*" runs through the Marriage Form – and gives us its essential flavor. As we seek to understand the instruction of this Form, we need to fix in our minds first the significance of this phrase.

We find it in the Form in the following places:

Announcement ⁴

*"The consistory announces that _____ and _____ have indicated their intention to enter into the married state, according to the ordinance of God. They desire to begin this holy state **in the Name of the Lord** and to complete it to His glory."*

Introduction

*"_____ and _____, since the consistory has duly made known to the congregation your desire to enter into the married state, and no lawful objection has been presented, we may now proceed to the solemnization of your marriage **in the Name of the Lord.**"*

The Duties of Marriage

*"... _____ and _____, you have now heard what the Lord requires of you and what He has promised you. May our gracious God give you the strength and the faithfulness to live together as husband and wife in this manner and may your help be **in the Name of the Lord** who made heaven and earth."*

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Scripture

The Marriage Form has borrowed the phrase *"in the Name of the Lord"* from Scripture itself in an express attempt to echo the Scriptural meaning of the phrase. In Deuteronomy 21:5 we read that Lord had chosen *"the priests, the sons of Levi, ... to minister to Him and to pronounce blessings in the name of the LORD."* The priests were not simply *"to bless"*; they were *"to bless in the name of the LORD."* We understand that something important is added by the reference to the name of the LORD, for the priests' actions were done on God's authority and so with the weight of God's reputation behind them. To receive a blessing 'in the name of the LORD' was a very different thing than to receive a blessing without the name of the LORD. A blessing 'in the name of LORD' was by definition *effective and consequential*.

**"TO MARRY 'IN THE NAME OF THE LORD' IS TO
RECKON WITH GOD'S REPUTATION, AUTHORITY
AND WORK IN MARRIAGE."**

David's words to Goliath are enlightening. *"You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied"* (1 Samuel 17:45). Had David come against Goliath on his own authority or with the backing of the reputation of the gods of Canaan, Goliath would have had little to fear. As it was, David claimed to come *in the name of the LORD*, and it was this knowledge that gave David the conviction that he would be victorious.

Similarly, Elijah's challenge to Israel's Baal worshipers is instructive. *"You call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire – He is God"* (1 Kings 18:24). The people in turn called on Baal, but Baal, of course, had no wherewithal to respond – for Baal did not exist outside the imagination of his worshipers. When Elijah in turn called on the LORD, fire instantly consumed the sacrifice, simply because the LORD is real, powerful, almighty. Actions done *in His name* are effective, and so bring about results.

In each of the above quotes, the term 'LORD' has been printed in upper case letters, and so represents the Hebrew word 'Yahweh' (or Jehovah). This is the name of the almighty Creator of heaven and earth who established a covenant, a bond of love, with sinners. The name speaks, then, of the grace of almighty God. In the Old Testament the term 'Lord' also appears in lower case letters as another name for God, meaning Master.

When the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek (the *Septu-*

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agint), both the Hebrew term for Yahweh (LORD) as well as the Hebrew term for Master (Lord) were translated with the same Greek word (*kurios*). So when the New Testament in turn used the word 'Lord' to refer to God, the reader was free to think of God as Yahweh (LORD) and/or as Master (Lord); the context determined which meaning was correct (and sometimes it was both). The same holds true for us who read the New Testament in English.

Form

For reasons unknown to me, the Marriage Form twice prints the phrase 'in the Name of the Lord' in lower case letters and once in upper case letters. Given that the Form uses the word 'Lord' with the Old Testament phrase 'in the Name of', it follows that we are to hear God's covenant name (LORD) in the background. In so doing, the Form stresses the fact that this marriage occurs on the authority of the almighty God of the covenant; none less than *He* is at work bringing two covenant children of His together into the holy state of marriage. If none less than God Himself brings bridegroom and bride together, they may (despite their weaknesses and life's trials) proceed to live together in this holy state in strength supplied by the God who joined them together. His work, after all, is profoundly effective. Here is enormous encouragement for the bridal couple: to marry 'in the Name of the LORD' is to reckon with God's reputation, authority and work in marriage. What He has begun He will certainly bring to completion (Psalm 138:8).

Consistory

A question arises. The 'Announcement' printed at the beginning of this chapter is a notice from the consistory of the church concerning the intended marriage of the given couple. Why is the consistory involved? Is marriage not a private matter, or a matter between the couple and their God?

It has pleased the Lord God to govern His people through elders, who together form the consistory⁵ of the church. All of life is to be directed to the glory of God, and the elders of the congregation are mandated to oversee that the members indeed live *all* life to His glory. The elders, then, have a responsibility to ensure that a member's choice for spouse is pleasing to God, and have a responsibility too to ensure that a member's reasons for marrying conform to God's reasons. The elders carry out this responsibility through visits with their members, and through conversation coming to understand the hearts and minds of the couple. Once the elders are satisfied that the marrying couple indeed wish to marry "*in the Name of the Lord*" and are intent also in persevering in their marriage "*in the Name of the Lord*" for as long as they live ("*they desire to ... complete it to His glory*"), the consistory is in a position to advise the congregation of their findings. The congregation, of course, also

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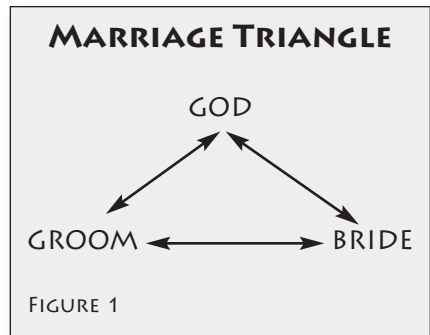
has a vested interest in being assured that the motives of the couple agree with God's purpose in giving the holy state of marriage. We are, after all, our brother's (and sister's) keeper.

With the announcement, then, the consistory does more than pass on information about the date of a proposed marriage. The purpose of the announcement is to advise the congregation that the couple is sincere in the Lord's service as they embark on a life of commitment to each other. If it might be that there are persons in the congregation who know differently about the couple's motive and/or sincerity in the Lord's service, they are at this point to draw their concerns to the attention of the consistory. If that does not happen, *"if no lawful objection is brought forward,"* the ceremony can proceed at the intended time. Conversely, if evidence arises that the proposed bridegroom and bride are not upright before God in their service to Him, they simply cannot marry *"in the Name of the Lord"*. Then the minister, bound as he is to his consistory, may not officiate their wedding until the consistory is satisfied that there is repentance.

Three

From the above it is evident too that a marriage between two people (the bride and the groom) ultimately involves *more* than simply the two. At bottom, God Himself is present, and intimately involved in the proceedings of the wedding day, as well as in the essence of what is happening. Marriage is not simply a line with the bride on the one end and the groom on the other; marriage essentially is a triangle, with the bride and the groom forming the two base points and the Lord Himself forming the apex (Figure 1). The bond that joins bride and groom together is not something between the two of them (be it love or necessity or something else), but the bond that ties the Godly bride and the Godly groom together lies ultimately in the Lord (the vertical lines) – His claim on them in the covenant, and their response of faith. This is a vital point to which we shall return in chapter 9.

In a secular world, where there is a distance between God and man and so between God and marriage too, the church makes bold to recognize God's hand in marriage. By acting *"in the Name of the Lord"* at a wedding ceremony the church makes a public statement that marriage not only comes from God, but is also possible under the blessing of God. Similarly, by getting married *"in the Name of the Lord,"* a Christian couple ex-



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presses publicly their reliance on God as the strength of their marriage. Behind the marriage ceremony of the godly couple is the love of God for the bridegroom and the bride, as well as their respective love for Him and reliance upon Him. Indeed, were that love for Him absent, there could not be a Christian marriage. That becomes evident when we next seek to uncover where marriage came from.

Points for Discussion:

1. In Article 63 of their Church Order, the Canadian Reformed Churches have agreed to the following in relation to marriage:

"The consistory shall ensure that the members of the congregation marry only in the Lord, and that the ministers –as authorized by the consistory– solemnize only such marriages as are in accordance with the Word of God.

The solemnization of a marriage may take place either in a private ceremony or in a public worship service. The adopted Form for the Solemnization of Marriage shall be used."

- a. Discuss why the Consistory has a responsibility in relation to who and how the congregation members marry. At what point should office bearers get involved in a couple's courtship?
 - b. With the assistance of WWJ vanOene, *With Common Consent* (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 1990), seek to understand why the Church Order stipulates that the solemnization of a marriage may take place *"either in a private ceremony or in a public worship service."* Which is the better procedure, and why?
 - c. List the arguments why *"the adopted Form for the Solemnization of Marriage shall be used"* when church members marry.
2. Is it desirable and/or necessary to marry in a church building? Why or why not?
 3. What comfort does the phrase "in the Name of the Lord" have for the marrying couple? What obligation is caught in the phrase?
 4. Ought one to have made profession of faith before marrying? Explain your answer. Would you give the same answer in relation to beginning a courtship? Why or why not?

⁴ In the pages that follow, quotations will be repeatedly lifted from the Form. Readers interested in knowing where the quotations fit into the Form are referred to the previous chapter, where the Form has been printed in its entirety. In an attempt to do justice to the flow of thought in the Form I have reproduced the headings under which a relevant quote is located.

⁵ This publication is not the place to elaborate on this point. For more detail see C. Bouwman, *Spiritual Order for the Church* (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 2000), pg 21ff.

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The Institution of Marriage

Two people have come together to be united publicly in holy wedlock. In keeping with the revelation of God in Scripture, their marriage concerns not just the two of them but involves also the God of the covenant. It is only fitting, then, that at their wedding the couple hear (again) God's instruction about marriage. In a lengthy quote from Genesis 2:18-24, the Marriage Form sets before the bridegroom and bride the work and word of God in Paradise as it pertains to marriage.

The Institution of Marriage

"The LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.' Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, He took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib He had taken out of the man, and He brought her to the man. The man said,

*'This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called 'woman, '
for she was taken out of man.'*

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his

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wife, and they will become one flesh."

Momentarily we will come to a detailed discussion of these verses. To help us understand what these verses say about marriage, we first need to consider the wider context in which these verses appear. Specifically, these words need to be read and understood in the context of the sixth day of creation.

Sixth Day of Creation

In Genesis 1 we read of God's creative deeds on the six consecutive days of creation. Concerning the sixth day we read:

"And God said, 'Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals, each according to its kind.' And it was so. God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.' ... God saw all that He had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning – the sixth day" (Genesis 1:24-31).

Here we have a bird's-eye view of what God did on the sixth day: He created animals plus man and woman. Of importance to our topic is the following from Genesis 1:

A. Man and Woman created as equals before God

After God created both the man and the woman, we read that *"God blessed **them**"* (Genesis 1:28). God did not bless only the man or only the woman, but both the man and the woman. The Bible allows no room here for the notion of a hierarchy with God at the top, the man in the middle and the woman at the bottom. On the contrary, the first time the Bible mentions the two genders of the human race, Holy Scripture sets them side by side, as equals before God.

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B. Man and Woman created in the image of God

This equality is driven home further with God's decision to make both male and female in His image. Both were equally equipped to reflect to all creation what God was like. Again, both were to make a point of imaging God as they ruled over God's handiwork. God's command to "*be fruitful and multiply*" implied that their children also, both boys and girls, could equally image God in their daily activities.

Sixth Day Detailed

Genesis 1:24-31 gave a bird's-eye view of God's work of creation on the sixth day. However, the details of how God went about making man and woman, and the sequence of events on that day, are given in Genesis 2.

**SINCE HE WAS ALMIGHTY, GOD WAS ABLE TO
TWEAK THE GORILLA HE'D MADE EARLIER IN THE
DAY TO FUNCTION AS A HELPER FOR THE MAN.**

According to Genesis 2:7, God initially created but one human being, namely, the male, Adam. He did so by shaping a man out of the dust of the ground and then breathing into his nostrils the breath of life. Earlier the Lord God had made a home for Adam (the garden of Eden), and now He placed him in that garden (verse 8) with the instruction to "*work it and take care of it*" (verse 15). For food God granted Adam permission to eat of any tree in the garden, except the tree of knowledge of good and evil (verses 16,17).

The passage, then, pictures Adam on the sixth day of creation, a man charged and equipped to care for the garden, but living on his own. God observed His handiwork so far, and did not at this point declare everything good (as He had done on the previous five days). Instead, the LORD God evaluated His work with these words: "*It is not good for the man to be alone.*" Hence His decision: "*I will make a helper suitable for him*" (Genesis 2:18).

Since He was almighty, God was able to tweak the gorilla He'd made earlier in the day to function as a helper for the man. He did not do so. Again, He was able to collect more dust from the earth and make of it a suitable helper. He did not do so. Instead, God did two things:

- He had all the animals and birds file past Adam. As Adam identified each creature with a name, it became evident that amongst all the creatures God had so far fashioned there was none that could serve as a helper to the man (Genesis 2:19,20).
- He caused the recently created man to fall into a deep sleep. While he

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slept the Creator performed surgery on the man to remove a section of his side (commonly translated as a 'rib'), and refashioned this rib into a woman (Genesis 2:21,22).

When Adam awoke from his surgery and saw the Lord his Creator approaching with a woman at His side as gift for Adam, the man burst forth into a song of praise to his Creator. The Holy Spirit caused Moses to record in verse 23 Adam's psalm of thanksgiving, his marriage song:

*"This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called 'woman, '
for she was taken out of man."*

It is at this point in time that we need to place chronologically the words of Genesis 1:31: *"God saw all that he had made, and it was **very good**. And there was evening, and there was morning— the sixth day."* God's earlier analysis to the effect that man's aloneness was *"not good"* is now replaced with His divine assessment that all is *"very good."* We need to realize that part of the *"very good"* is also the creation of man *and* woman, *as well as* the institution of marriage itself as described in Genesis 2.

When society around us says that marriage has had its day and that there are alternative legitimate ways of living together, society diametrically opposes what God has said. God said from the beginning that *"it was very good"* that a man and a woman should be united in marriage as instituted by Him on the sixth day of creation. To seek and practice alternatives to God's way for marriage can only have negative consequences, for God's blessing can only be expected when God is obeyed. Let man, creature that he is (and sinful at that), not set himself up as judge over his Creator's pronouncement that the ordinance of marriage as Biblically defined is *"very good"*, and declare it not so. To do so is simply arrogance.

God's Principles For Marriage As Taught In Genesis 2:18

This overview of how God created the first man and the first woman, and then joined them together in the holy state of marriage, leads to a number of principles basic to marriage. The following can be mentioned:

1. It is not good that man should be alone.

Aloneness was not God's intent when He created man. God Himself was dissatisfied with the man-by-himself, and so created the woman. By the same token, aloneness was not God's intent for the woman either, as is evident from the fact that she was created for the man. The two genders need each other.

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In line with this principle from Genesis 2, we find in Scripture that the 'married state' is the norm, and the 'unmarried state' the exception. In fact, in the Old Testament we read of no one who was unmarried, with the one exception of Jeremiah. He remained single because God gave him this instruction: "*You must not marry and have sons or daughters in this place*" (Jeremiah 16:2). His unmarried state stood out as rare and exceptional, and so made Jeremiah a living prophecy of what was to become of apostate Israel; no longer would Israel have a relation of love with the Lord God, and no longer would Israel have a future.

Similarly, of all the people mentioned in the New Testament, we know with certainty only that our Lord Jesus Christ never married, due to the special nature of His task. Of Paul we know that at the time he wrote 1 Corinthians 7 he was not married, for he writes in verse 7: "*I wish that all men were as I am*" – and the context makes clear that that's a reference to being unmarried. These words do not, however, exclude the possibility that he used to be married and was now widowed. It is also worthwhile to realize that it is "*hypocritical liars*" who "*forbid people to marry*" (1 Timothy 4:2,3). Celibacy, though encouraged by the church in the name of the Lord over the years, has no Scriptural basis, and is certainly not the norm God intended for man or for woman. So we do well to encourage our young people to seek the holy state of marriage.

2. The woman is Helper

In response to God's observation that "*it is not good for the man to be alone,*" the Lord in sovereign wisdom determined as solution to "*make a helper suitable for him*" (Genesis 2:18). These two factors, the problem and the solution, together capture the very purpose of marriage. The central or primary purpose of marriage is not procreation (although this in itself is a very important purpose of marriage and is a blessing of God upon marriage; cf Genesis 1:28). The primary purpose of marriage is for a man and a woman to complement each other as they go about their task of imaging God.

In the course of church history, there have been those who taught that woman is inferior to man. Thomas Aquinas, for example, wrote in the thirteenth century, "Woman was made to be a help to man. But she was not fitted to be a help to man except in generation, because another man would prove a more effective help in anything else."⁶ This, however, was certainly not God's intention when creating the woman as a helper for Adam. We can confidently say so because the word 'helper' occurs at least a dozen times in the Old Testament concerning God's own relation to man. That fact alone tells us that there is nothing negative or inferior caught in the word 'helper'.

The following passages give us a flavor of what the Scriptures mean with the word 'helper':

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- As a fugitive in Midian, Moses named his second son 'Eliezer' because (he said), *"My father's God was my helper; he saved me from the sword of Pharaoh"* (Exodus 18:4). On his own strength Moses was not able to escape Pharaoh's powerful sword.
- After Israel defeated the Philistines in battle, Samuel set up a memorial stone named Ebenezer to commemorate that, *"Thus far has the LORD helped us"* (1 Samuel 7:12). God's help had come in the face of Israel's great fear of the Philistines; the Lord used the forces of nature to thunder against the Philistines and rout them. The point is that Israel was deficient in the face of the Philistines and so needed a helper.
- As the psalmist eyed the road he needed to travel and considered the dangers of highwaymen, sunstroke, or sliding out on the pebbles of the trail, he wondered where his help might come from. His answer: *"My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth"* (Psalm 121:2). Here's an awareness that the road has more risks than he can overcome on his own strength, and so a recognition that he needs help.
- In similar vein, the psalmist of Psalm 124 confessed in the midst of fierce attacks and raging waters that *"our help is in the name of the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth"* (Psalm 124:8).

In all these cases (and others could be mentioned), the person concerned does not have within himself what it takes to face the challenges before him. There's a deficiency that makes 'help' necessary.

The Lord God said that the man He created needed a helper; his aloneness was a deficiency rendering him less than able—physically, emotionally, spiritually—to carry out the challenges of the task God had given the man. To overcome that deficiency, the Lord created the woman to be 'helper' for the man. She completes him. More, to overcome that deficiency, the Lord did not set the woman at a distance from the man, but bound her to the man in the holy state of marriage. With the woman taken from his side—and hence now *at* his side—the man Adam was complete, now able to fulfill the purpose for which God had created him. The man *needs* the woman; the woman *is for* the man.

3. Order in Creation: the Man First, the Woman Second

Although it was possible for God to create woman first and designate the man as her helper, He in His sovereign wisdom did it the other way around. He put the man in the Garden before He formed the woman, and told the man alone to work the garden and take care of it. *His* was the mandate to cultivate the earth and to develop culture. *Hers* was the mandate to help him in this task.

Through the apostle Paul the Holy Spirit draws out the implication of this order of creation. *"I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God"* (1

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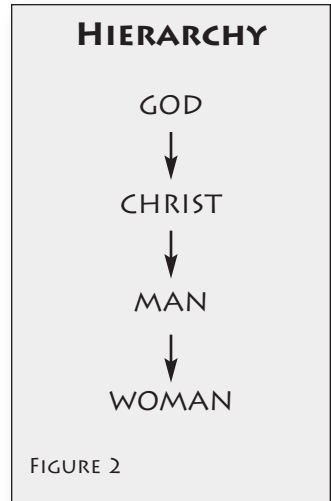
Corinthians 11:3). And later: *"For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man"* (1 Corinthians 11:8,9). Paul describes a hierarchy in descending order from God to Christ to man to woman (Figure 2). The Son did not beget the Father, but the Father begot the Son, and so there is 'priority' to the Father in the relation between these two Persons of the holy Trinity. This 'priority' does not mean that the Father is more important than the Son, nor does it mean that the Son is less than the Father; within the Trinity the two are equal. Similarly, *"man did not come from woman, but woman from man,"* and so there is 'priority' to the man in the relation between these two genders of the human species. This 'priority'

does not mean that the man is more important than the woman, nor does it mean that the woman is less than the man. But it does mean that the one is the head, and the other is not! The man's headship holds true in marriage, and yet not only in marriage, no more than the Father's headship over Christ is limited to one aspect of Their existence. Adam alone was placed in the Garden and was told to *"work it and take care of it,"* cultivate the ground and develop culture (Genesis 2:15). His aloneness made him insufficient to the task so that God created the woman to complete him, but that doesn't take away from the fact that in his daily work Adam was the head, and the woman was his helper. The hierarchy of 'first' and 'second' pertains to all of life.

To be clear: this priority of the man does not mean that he is master over his wife, or that she is somehow his footstool – even as the Father's 'priority' over the Son does not make the Father a Master over the Son, or the Son His footstool. Paul says this about the matter in 1 Corinthians 11: *"In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman"* (verses 11,12). Though God created man first and the woman second, Paul recognizes that there is a mutual dependence between the two genders. Within these principles supplied in Genesis 2 lie hidden what the Bible later teaches about the specific roles of husband and wife in marriage and society.

4. The First Wedding Song

After Adam awoke from his deep sleep, God brought to him the gift He had made for him: a helper suitable for him so that he would be complete. His eyes beheld her coming to him: the woman fashioned from his rib. She was



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a new sight for his eyes, and yet he recognized her for what she was: a *part of him*. He and she belonged together. So Adam sang:

*"This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called 'woman,'
for she was taken out of man"* (Genesis 2:23).

This phrase "*bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh*" comes back in other places in Scripture, and turns out to mean more than that one is biologically related to the other.

- After Jacob arrived at his uncle Laban's place in Padan Aram, Laban said to him, "*You are my own flesh and blood*" (Genesis 29:14). Other translations capture the Hebrew literally, "*Surely you are my bone and my flesh*" (NKJV), and so draw the link with Adam's words in Genesis 2. On grounds of the kinship between the two men, Jacob not only lived with Laban but also began to work for him. To be 'bone and flesh' led to co-operation, being a team.
- After his father died, Abimelech "*went to his mother's brothers in Shechem and said to them and to all his mother's clan, 'Ask all the citizens of Shechem, Which is better for you: to have all seventy of Jerubbaal's sons rule over you, or just one man?' Remember, I am your flesh and blood.*" Or, as the Hebrew has it, "*I am your own flesh and bone*" (NKJV). The result of his request was that "*the citizens of Shechem ... inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, 'He is our brother'*" (Judges 9:1-3). As a result cooperation developed between Abimelech and the people of Shechem.

One can refer also to 2 Samuel 5:1, 2 Samuel 19:11,12, etc. From passages as these, this conclusion becomes clear: to speak about being flesh and bone is more than to acknowledge biological kinship; to speak of flesh and bone is to engage in cooperation, to do things with and for each other.

This is what happens in Genesis 2 also. When God brought the woman to Adam, the man in his wedding song did more than acknowledge a blood relationship; he also confessed that the two would work together and be a team. Was she not to be his helper, the gift God gave to complete what was insufficient in Adam? Precisely because she was his flesh and bone could they work together in the Garden and develop the creation God entrusted to their care.

This conclusion is remarkable when we realize that the woman was a total stranger to Adam when he sang this wedding song about her. Adam did not yet know her character, let alone the characteristics of womanhood. Yet he received the woman eagerly as a helper with whom he could work, and was excited about the possibilities her arrival presented. Here was evidence of

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trust in the God who gave Adam this woman. God the Creator would make no mistake in giving this woman to this man; by definition, she would be a perfect fit.

Interestingly enough, Isaac responded in the same way when the Lord God in His providence provided him with Rebekah. Note the progress of action in the following passage, "*Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he married Rebekah. So she became his wife, and he loved her*" (Genesis 24:67). Though the woman who entered his life was a stranger to him, Isaac married her and eventually learned to love her. This was because he received Rebekah from God's hand, and he believed that whatever God gives is well-given. In faith, then, he made a point of loving this woman.

Rightly does the Form for Marriage say that "*the LORD also today gives husband and wife to one another.*" Since the Lord's hand is behind the wife I receive, I am duty-bound to love her, and to keep loving her despite what time and stress can do to her character, her looks, her health, etc. In His wisdom God has ordained that *she* is the particular woman needed to complete me as I travel the road of life over the years God gives. The same, of course, holds true for the woman in relation to the man God in wisdom gives her. Here the child of God lives and acts by faith.

5. God's Principles for Marriage as Taught in Genesis 2:24

After Moses recorded how the Lord formed the woman on the sixth day of creation and gave her to the man (Genesis 2:18-23), the Holy Spirit moved him to record for the benefit of all future readers what consequence followed. "*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh*" (Genesis 2:24), Moses wrote. With this sentence the Holy Spirit draws out the significance of God's pronouncement on the sixth day that "*it is not good for the man to be alone,*" and His subsequent creation of woman and marriage. Every man and woman coming after Adam and Eve are bound to the pattern God initiated when He brought the first woman to the first man in holy wedlock. That the New Testament would three times quote this conclusion from God's work in Genesis 2 (Matthew 19:5, Mark 10:7,8 and Ephesians 5:31) points up that this conclusion remains valid for all people in all times and cultures. The following principles flow from it:

5.1 Marriage involves two genders

Genesis 2:24 does not speak of a man leaving his father and mother to be joined to another man but, rather, to be joined to his *wife*: a woman. Here already, in the very early pages of the Bible, no place is given to homosexual marriage. Man does not complete man, but woman completes man. Similarly,

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woman is not a 'helper' for another woman, but is a 'helper' to a man. Marriage is not a union of two individuals of the same sex, but is by God's ordinance a union between two individuals of opposite gender, the union of a man and a woman.

5.2 Marriage is a monogamous relationship

Genesis 2:24 speaks of 'man' and 'wife' in the singular: "**a man ... his wife.**" The principle of Genesis 2 allows no room for 'bigamy', ie, having two wives or husbands at once, as Lamech did (Genesis 4:23). Equally, there is no room for 'polygamy', having many wives or many husbands. Adam did not need multiple wives to be complete, nor did Eve require multiple husbands – though God was mighty to create such a situation. After having united one woman to one man in holy marriage, God judged that all was "*very good*" (Genesis 1:31).

5.3 To marry means to leave father and mother

God had earlier commanded Adam and his wife to "*be fruitful and increase in number*" (Genesis 1:28). This instruction included, we understand, the task to raise the children God granted. We picture in the eye of our mind, very rightly, a home where sons and daughters live with father and mother. Yet when the son received a wife from God's hand – says the Holy Spirit – he "*will leave his father and mother.*" In the first instance this means that the young man develops a new priority in his relationships. The deficiency that was there with his manliness has been completed through the wife sovereign God in wisdom has given him. His allegiance must now be geared first to her. She has become his God-ordained 'helper', together the two have become 'one flesh', and so the young man's relation with his wife must take priority over his relation to his parents. The same is true for the young wife. Precisely because the Lord God has made her a helper to the man to whom God wed her, her focus is now to be her husband and not her parents. Physically leaving the parental home in order to live with the new spouse can certainly help bring about a healthy emotional or psychological 'leaving' of father and mother. So a young couple will make decisions together, and wise parents will give their married children space to make their own decisions – and mistakes.

5.4 Marriage involves cleaving to each other

The young man who receives a helper from God's hand is not just to "*leave ... his father and mother,*" but is also to "*be united to his wife.*" The word translated as 'united' is used elsewhere in Scripture to convey the notion of *cleaving*, and has within it the nuance of loyalty and faithfulness. When Naomi advised Ruth and Orpah to stay in Moab instead to accompany her to the land of Judah, Orpah bade Naomi farewell, "*but Ruth **clung** to her*" (Ruth

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1:14). The nature and significance of Ruth's clinging becomes obvious from her reply to Naomi's second entreaty not to accompany her to Israel. Said Ruth: *"Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me"* (Ruth 1:16,17). Here is a forceful sense of loyalty and devotion that would remain till death they did part. This is what's caught in the word 'cling', the same word the Holy Spirit used in Genesis 2 concerning marriage.

Again, when Sheba the Benjaminite led Israel in rebellion against King David, *"the men of Judah stayed by their king"* (2 Samuel 20:2), and the Hebrew has the same word as we find in Genesis 2. They clung to David through good days and bad, and so give the flavor of the Spirit's choice of word to describe the allegiance of husband to wife and of wife to husband.

The word 'cling' is also used various times in the book of Deuteronomy to describe what Israel ought to do in relation to God. Israel was to cling, or hold fast, to God, to remain faithful and loyal to Him as He was to them. *"And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways, to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.... Fear the LORD your God and serve Him. Hold fast to Him..."* (Deuteronomy 10:12,20; see also 11:22; 30:20).

The NIV translation *"be united"* in Genesis 2:24 is, then, too weak. The ordinance of God as caught in the verb the Holy Spirit uses is that the young man and his wife shall cleave together, shall stay loyal to each other through thick and thin. Such cleaving together is the obvious consequence of God's divine decision to give the man a 'helper'. It's true of the young man raised in the parental home as much as it was true of Adam in Paradise: *"it is not good for the man to be alone"* (Genesis 2:18). Since God in His wisdom has given a 'helper' to fill that deficiency, the two must cling together as long as God gives them life, and so make a point of being for each other what God ordained them to be. It is not without significance that this is the text Jesus quoted when He taught about the permanence of marriage, and hence resisted divorce (see Mark 10:2-9).

5.5 In marriage two people become one flesh

By God's ordinance, the young man and his new bride *"will become one flesh."* At its most basic level, this is a reference to sexual relations, as is evident from Paul's quote of this phrase in 1 Corinthians 6:16: *"Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, 'The two will become one flesh.'"*

On this understanding of the phrase, this text also stipulates when a

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man and woman may engage in sexual activity. Notice the sequence of the three phrases in verse 24: first a man leaves his parents, then he joins his wife (ie, he clings to her, vowing lifetime loyalty to her), and only then does he become one flesh with her. In other words, sexual relations do not precede marriage but –by God’s ordinance– belong *within* the marriage bond. This principle not only prohibits pre-marital sexual relations, but also prohibits extra-marital sexual relations. *They*, husband and wife exclusively, become one flesh. Within marriage there is no place for a third party.

TO BECOME ONE FLESH WITH ONE’S SPOUSE ENCOMPASSES MORE THAN JUST THE SEXUAL ACT.

But to become one flesh with one’s spouse encompasses more than just the sexual act. If husband and wife do not involve themselves in things deeper than sex, they will soon experience sex as something hollow and unsatisfying. In fact, properly understood, sexual activity is a symbol of the full unity that characterizes marriage any moment of the day or night – a unity not limited to the marriage bed. By the ordinance of God the man needs the woman to complete him, and the woman fulfils her purpose by being helper to the man. His deficiency and her help are not limited to sexuality! For the one to complete the other, the married couple need to share *every aspect* of their being, including their hearts, minds, souls and bodies. Only when a sharing of the deeper things of life forms the backdrop to sexual relations between husband and wife can sexual intimacy be the beautiful thing the Holy Spirit describes in the Song of Solomon. (See further chapter 11.)

6. Openness

The two people God created on the sixth day of creation, united by God as they were in holy marriage, “*were both naked, and they felt no shame*” (Genesis 2:25). They were totally open with each other, exposed in heart and soul for the other to read and know, fully comfortable in each other’s presence – to say now nothing of the presence of their holy Creator. They could be open with each other simply because they conformed fully to the role God created for husband and wife in marriage, for God’s work was “*very good*” (Genesis 1:31). (See further chapter 9.)

Subsequent Development

The beauty of marriage as God created it was unrecognizably marred by the fall into sin. For reasons left unexplained to us, the serpent addressed

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the woman in the Garden with the suggestion that she eat from the forbidden tree. She did so, and then offered fruit to her husband, who in turn also ate. It is futile to theorize about why Satan approached the woman instead of the man. It is futile also to theorize about what would have happened had Adam refused to join his wife in transgression. The fact of the matter is that both disobeyed the instruction of the Lord their God. The result was instantaneous: the harmony and unity of their marriage relationship was broken. When the Lord God confronted the man with his sin, he pointed a finger at his wife: *"The woman You put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it"* (Genesis 3:12). From this point in history onward, people still married, but never again did they experience the beauty of marriage as God created it. Same-sex marriage, bigamy and polygamy, parents dominating and frustrating the lives and hopes of children and children-in-law, divorce, lack of communication in marriage, selfishness in relation to sexuality, tyranny within marriage (be it from the husband's side or the wife's), and so many other ills have characterized the marriages of so many millions since the days of Genesis 3. Because of the fall into sin, marriage was distinctly no longer *"very good."*

**THANKS TO THE RENEWING WORK OF CHRIST'S
SPIRIT, GOD FEARING COUPLES CAN AGAIN TASTE
SOMETHING OF THE BEAUTY OF MARRIAGE AS
GOD INTENDED**

How wonderful, then, that when the Lord God sent His only Son into the world to atone for sin, Jesus Christ began His public ministry *at a wedding* (John 2:1-11). The Marriage Form is quick to remind the marrying couple of this delightful fact with these words: *"Also, our Lord Jesus Christ honored marriage when He revealed His glory at the marriage feast at Cana."* The young couple in Cana of Galilee shared the same hopes and expectations that any young person brings to marriage, but their depravity dictated that their marriage would know just as much pain and frustration as their ancestors had experienced for countless generations. In fact, the shortage of wine at the wedding feast served as a painful symbol of the shortages and brokenness that were sure to characterize their marriage. But the Christ who would soon go to the cross to pay for sin and reconcile sinners to God solved the problem of the shortage in a wonderful way, and so foreshadowed that His redeeming work on Calvary would also impact the brokenness the couple would experience in marriage. Thanks to the renewing work of Christ's Spirit, God-fearing couples can again taste something of the beauty of marriage as God intended!

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So the Holy Spirit, after the triumph of Jesus Christ on the cross and His ascension into heaven, can give through the apostle to the Hebrews this instruction to the church of the New Testament dispensation: *"Marriage should be honored by all..."* (Hebrews 13:4). Though God's ordinance of marriage was so broken through our fall into sin, God in Christ has given marriage again an honorable place in the lives He gives His people. Here, at bottom, is the reason why the Song of Solomon sings up marriage and its pleasures so delightfully. The Marriage Form catches this well with these words, *"Marriage is an institution of God which pleases Him, and must therefore be held in honor among all."* Note the present tense of the verb 'is'; marriage today pleases God!

In fact, this material lays the groundwork for understanding that puzzling word of Paul when he calls marriage *"a profound mystery"*, and then proceeds to say that he's *"talking about Christ and the church"* (Ephesians 5:32). We'll come back to this passage in chapters 6 and 7.

Conclusion

The revelation of God about the institution of marriage in Genesis 2 is recorded for the benefit of people living in a fallen world. If this institution were of no relevance today, the Lord would not have told us in such detail about how and why He created marriage in the first place. As it is, the Lord Jesus Christ through His work on the cross has in principle restored the Paradise we lost. So the fundamentals of marriage as revealed in Genesis 2 are of vital importance to marriage today, as the following chapters will attempt to show.

Points for Discussion:

1. Emphasis was laid on the fact that man and woman are equal in one way and not equal in another. Are you comfortable with that arrangement? Why or why not? Ensure that you understand in what way the two genders are equal and in what way they are not.
2. Mention was made in this chapter of the fact that the Lord God created man and woman 'in His image'. We will return in a later chapter to what 'image of God' means. Meanwhile, have a preliminary round of discussion on what the concept 'image of God' means.
3. Is it reasonable to say, in the brokenness of this world, that our Young People *ought* to marry? Why or why not?
4. Consider whether you attach in your thoughts a negative stigma to singleness. What do you, your family and your church do in relation to the single in your midst?
5. Is it a privilege or a burden for a man to be leader? Explain your answer.

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6. Is it a privilege or a burden for a woman to be a helper? Explain your answer.
7. Genesis 2:24 places sexual contact strictly within marriage. Find other passages from Scripture that clarify God's will in relation to experimenting with sexuality before marriage.
8. God's creation of man and woman in Genesis 2 says much about God's will concerning same-sex marriage. Find other passages of Scripture to support this conclusion from Genesis 2.
9. God's creation of man and woman in Genesis 2 says much about God's will concerning bigamy and polygamy. Find other passages of Scripture to support this conclusion from Genesis 2.
10. Reflect on the wisdom of a newly married couple living around the corner from a parental home.
11. What does the phrase 'become one flesh' actually mean? Is becoming one flesh an instant thing or a process? Explain.

⁶ As quoted in Susan T Foh, *Women and the Word of God* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1979), pg 60.

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The Permanence of Marriage: Till Death Us Do Part

The holy state of marriage is God's creation. Is it His intent that those who marry today may do so with an escape clause worked into the fine print? How long would God have marriage last? The answer of the Form is clear from the following quotations:

The Institution of Marriage

After quoting Genesis 2:18-24, the Form adds these words: *"We therefore believe that the LORD also today gives husband and wife to one another. Since they are united by His hand, nothing shall separate them in this life."* A few sentences later: Jesus *"teaches us that marriage is an institution of God and should not be broken, when He says, 'Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate. Since God has made marriage such a strong bond, He hates divorce, as also our Lord Jesus Christ shows in these words, 'I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.'"* The quoted texts come from Matthew 19:6 and 9.

The Marriage Vows

Consequently, bridegroom and bride are both asked to say *"I do"* to this question: *"Do you also promise never to forsake her (or him), but to be true to her always, in good days and bad, in riches and poverty, in health and sickness, for as long as you both shall live?"*

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In the Beginning...

Given the material of the previous chapter, this answer in the Form is not surprising. The Lord God had created the man and placed him in the Garden, then concluded that *"it is not good for the man to be alone,"* and so God created *"a helper suitable for him"* (Genesis 2:18). We understand that it would not be acceptable for Adam to desert his wife or send her away on grounds that he could manage quite alright on his own, for God had analyzed the situation differently. Similarly, it would not be acceptable for Eve to desert her husband on grounds that she couldn't stand him or wanted more freedom, for God had created her for the man. The words of the Holy Spirit in Genesis 2:24 – *"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife..."* – leave no place for the termination of marriage. God's intent was that man and wife should cling to each other, without end.

**WHEN GOD CREATED MARRIAGE, HE SIMPLY DID
NOT INTEND AN EXIT STRATEGY.**

The fall into sin had a profoundly devastating effect on the holy state of marriage. Adam, though head, was quick to point an accusing finger at Eve when God inquired as to whether he had eaten from the forbidden tree (Genesis 3:12). That was certainly not the posture of Paradise, and was in fact symptomatic of the selfishness that came to characterize the fallen human race. One could be forgiven for thinking, then, that two sinners – each depraved and equally self-seeking – should now be given space to opt out of an unhappy relationship.

It is, then, surprising to read that the great Prophet and Teacher of the Church would insist that the norm of God as revealed in Genesis 2 is still in force in this fallen world. The Pharisees questioned Jesus as to whether it is *"lawful for a man to divorce his wife"*? (Mark 10:1-9). The long and short of Jesus' reply was this: *"at the beginning of creation, God 'made them male and female.'" Jesus continued: "'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."* We recognize Jesus' quote as coming from Genesis 2; Jesus insists that God's norm as revealed in Genesis 2 holds true even after the fall into sin! Despite inherent selfishness, husband and wife are to cling to each other, without the possibility of stepping out of an unhappy relationship.

Given all that was said in the previous chapter about Genesis 2, this ought to be sufficient to demonstrate that the Lord would have marriage be

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permanent. When God created marriage, He simply did not intend an exit strategy. Those who marry, then, may not voice their vows on the assumption that their union has a legitimate back door out.

Divorce was a known entity in the time when the Marriage Form was drafted, and so its authors saw fit to include in the Form something about God's instruction on the subject. With the liberalization of divorce laws in recent decades, divorce has become so routine in the western world that many of those who marry do not feel bound to stick to their vow till death parts bride and groom. This affects also those who take the Word of God and the God of the Word seriously. We do well, then, to examine in more detail what one ought to think about the permanence of marriage. In what follows, I take the reader first on a brief walk through church history, then we consider the analogy of God as portrayed in Scripture, and finally we pay some attention to specific texts relating to divorce (and remarriage).

The Permanence of Marriage in Church History

The early church

From the earliest days of the Christian church there was a clear consensus that marriage was permanent. Once one voiced a vow of devotion to the spouse, one was bound to stand by that vow irrespective of the challenges one might face. The only exception granted within the early church revolved around the allowance that Jesus Christ expressed in Matthew 19, namely, that divorce was possible in the context of adultery. In fact, several church fathers insisted that in the event of adultery the faithful party *ought* to sue for divorce, and then remain unmarried.⁷

During the thirteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church made marriage a sacrament. In doing so, the church also made divorce effectively impossible even in situations of adultery. During the fifteenth century the Dutch Humanist, Desiderius Erasmus, argued that it is simply too hard on people in a bad marriage to be obliged to remain married. On grounds of common sense and pity for their unhappiness, he said, allowance ought to be made for divorce. Similarly, because being restricted to a life of singleness after divorce is too difficult, the divorced should be permitted to marry again.

The Reformation

Empathy for people's human and pastoral needs prompted leading reformers to give allowances for divorce (and remarriage). Luther believed that divorce was wrong except in cases where there was adultery, desertion, or a refusal to engage in sexual relations. Other reformers came up with a longer list of reasons that made divorce permissible. In the course of years, just two grounds for dissolving a marriage were retained as Scriptural. The one was

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based on Jesus' words in Matthew 19:9: "*I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.*" The other was based on Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 7:15: "*But if the believer leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.*" These two reasons have found their way into Article 24 of the Westminster Confession:

V. Adultery or fornication committed after a contract, being detected before marriage, giveth just occasion to the innocent party to dissolve that contract. In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce, and, after the divorce, to marry another, as if the offending party were dead.

VI. Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments, unduly to put asunder those whom God hath joined together in marriage; yet nothing but adultery, or such wilful desertion as can no way be remedied by the church or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage: wherein a public and orderly course of proceeding is to be observed, and the persons concerned in it not left to their own wills and discretion in their own case.

Notice that when the Westminster Confession permits divorce on the two possible grounds of adultery and willful desertion, this Confession also opens the door to remarriage for the 'innocent' party.

Recently

For four centuries since the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century, the western Christian world has consistently frowned upon divorce. Only on the rare occasion did divorce occur, and a stigma invariably attached to the family concerned.

Society's embrace of secularization after World War II has changed the public's estimation of divorce and of the need for permanency in marriage. Divorces have lately become so common that one marriage in three now ends in divorce. This decay in relation to marriage in the world at large has had its predictable consequences in the churches, so that amongst Christians too there are noticeably more divorces today than in years past.

The increasing number of divorces (also amongst Christians) has of late prompted a rethink on what the Lord God actually teaches about the permanence of marriage. Consider the following two scenarios:

- Though tensions have driven a Christian husband and wife apart, both parties have resisted the temptation to commit adultery. On the historic

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understanding, divorce was not a Scripturally permissible option, and hence remarriage was not either. The two were doomed to a life of singleness, or reconciliation.

- Tensions have driven a Christian wife into the arms of a third party. On the historic understanding, the 'innocent' husband could because of her adultery sue for divorce and marry again, and now live happily ever after. Through his sin of pestering, he opened the door to legal remarriage. Alternatively, through her moment of weakness, she has opened for her ex-husband the door to legal remarriage.

One appreciates that something here is wrong. Consequently, in 1993 the Synod of our sister churches in the Netherlands received a request to study what Scripture really said about divorce and remarriage. After a number of study committees had reported to subsequent synods, the Synod of 2005 came with a number of conclusions. They read as follows:

- 1. The Lord instituted marriage. This strong bond between a man and a woman may not be severed by men (Genesis 2:24; Malachi 2:14-16; Matthew 19:3-6; 1 Corinthians 7:10,11).
Divorce is a serious evil which must be prevented and resisted as much as possible. Living according to the style of the kingdom of Christ means that in all cases of marriage difficulty we strive for reconciliation and restoration of the relationship.*
- 2. If a marriage is damaged as a result of sin or the fall into sin, it is proper in following Christ, to pursue restoration of the marriage bond through repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation and/or maintain the marriage bond as much as possible through self-denial. In so doing, it may become evident that one needs to acquiesce to divorce.*
- 3. In a circumstance where the marriage bond has in fact come to an end, it is most in accord with the style of the kingdom of Christ still to maintain the marriage formally, and to choose for a solution wherein the spouses (officially) make an agreement together or decide to separate.*
- 4. Even in the above mentioned circumstances, the oath of marriage remains in force, as long as both spouses remain alive. That is why remarriage after divorce in principle does not fit in the style of the kingdom of Christ.*
- 5. As a rule, ecclesiastical sanction of a subsequent marriage is not possible if a previous marriage was terminated through divorce.⁸*

I welcome this development as put to paper by the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. Whereas society had opened the door wide to divorce

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and given ample opportunity for second marriages, this Synod greatly discouraged divorce and effectively closed the door on remarriage in church. This does far more justice to the revelation of God in Scripture, as the following pages will attempt to show.

The Permanence of Marriage in the Analogy of God

The Lord God created man *"in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them"* (Genesis 1:27). As *image of God*, mankind (in distinction from all other creatures) was entrusted with the privileged task of reflecting to the world what God was like. Also in the holy state of marriage the man and his wife could reflect something of God's characteristics.

**THE LORD DID NOT REJECT THIS SINFUL PEOPLE,
NOR GO BACK ON HIS PROMISES TO THEM.**

Patriarchs

What is the Lord God like in His relation to His people? He promised to Abram that He would make Abram *"into a great nation"* and would bless him. Indeed, *"I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you"* (Genesis 12:2,3). But Abram was so undeserving! A famine drove him to Egypt, and in fear of his life he instructed his wife Sarai to lie; *"Say you are my sister"* (Genesis 12:13). Despite Abram's deceit, the Lord God made a covenant with Abram (Genesis 15), and repeated the promise of children. When the children God promised did not eventuate in the timeframe Abram considered reasonable, he impregnated Sarai's servant (Genesis 16). Despite Abram's adultery, the Lord God did not renege on His promises to Abram, but told him again that He established His covenant with Abram so that He would be Abram's God (Genesis 17). The point is this: despite Abram's unworthiness and sinfulness, the Lord God stood by His promises to Abram. He revealed Himself as a merciful and faithful God, unchanging in respect of His promises, reliable.

The same divine characteristic comes out in God's approach to Jacob. In his infancy the Lord God established His covenant of love with Jacob; on the eighth day of his life the lad was circumcised as a sign and seal of God's claim upon him. Yet Jacob swindled the rights to the first-born blessing from his brother Esau in his moment of desperation (Genesis 25:29-34), and later deceived his father to receive the first-born blessing (Genesis 27). Despite his ungodly actions, the Lord God did not renege on His promises to Jacob, but

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continued to enfold him with His care and blessing. The people of Israel in Egypt were God's children by covenant, but in their oppression they served other gods (Joshua 24:14). Yet the Lord did not reject this sinful people, nor go back on His promises to them. Instead, in boundless mercy He stood by His word, delivered this people from their slavery, re-established His covenant with Israel, and gave them the Promised Land – just as He had promised.

Marriage to Israel

This theme of God's faithfulness in standing by His promises comes into sharper focus when we observe how God Himself relates it to marriage. When Israel was *"old enough for love, I spread the corner of My garment over you.... I gave you My solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign LORD, and you became Mine"* (Ezekiel 16:8). To spread the corner of one's garment over another was symbolic of entering a marriage relationship (see Ruth 3:9). The covenant God established with Israel at Mt Sinai was effectively His marriage bond with this people. So the Lord could say in Jeremiah 3:14 (and in 31:32) that *"I am your husband."*

It's the reality of this marital relation between God and Israel that prompted the Holy Spirit's choice of language when He described Israel's sins. Already at Mt Sinai, shortly after He 'married' Israel, the Lord gave this warning to His people through Moses, *"Any Israelite or any alien living in Israel who gives any of his children to Molech must be put to death.... If the people of the community close their eyes when that man gives one of his children to Molech and they fail to put him to death, I will set My face against that man and his family and will cut off from their people both him and all who follow him in prostituting themselves to Molech"* (Leviticus 20:2-5). Notice God's use of the word 'prostituting' here (or, as other translations have it, 'harlotry' or 'whoring'). To sacrifice a child to the god of the Ammonites (Molech) amounts to spiritual adultery, said God, for Israel already has a Husband to whom she is bound by a covenant of marriage.

Before Moses died, the Lord God told him what His people's future conduct would be like. *"These people will soon prostitute themselves to the foreign gods of the land they are entering. They will forsake Me and break the covenant I made with them"* (Deuteronomy 31:16). This, in fact, is how it turned out. *"Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. They forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them.... Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them"* (Judges 2:11-17). God's use of the word 'prostituted' in this context describes both the heart of their sin as well

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as the hurt of Israel's Husband; here was adultery, plain and simple, a bride unfaithful to her Spouse. Yet the pain of Israel's sin did not prompt her Husband to discard her, or to strike up a relation with a new partner (say, the Moabites or the Tutsis or the Chinese), but He stayed faithful to His partner-by-covenant and kept sending judges to deliver His people. In the course of the years He sent so many prophets to warn and to admonish, and He sent so many plagues and crises in an effort to draw His people to repentance. Talk about standing by the promise once made *"never to forsake her, but to be true to her always, in good days and bad, in riches and (spiritual) poverty, in health and sickness..."*!

GOD'S USE OF THE WORD 'PROSTITUTED' IN THIS CONTEXT DESCRIBES BOTH THE HEART OF THEIR SIN AS WELL AS THE HURT OF ISRAEL'S HUSBAND; HERE WAS ADULTERY, PLAIN AND SIMPLE, A BRIDE UNFAITHFUL TO HER SPOUSE.

Yet even as He stood by His promises, the Lord took some extreme measures to generate repentance in Israel's conduct. He commanded the prophet Hosea *"to take to yourself an adulterous wife"* –why?– *"because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD"* (Hosea 1:2). Through her Hosea received children, and the names of the children prophetically announced what God intended to do to His unfaithful wife. One child received the name Lo-Ruhamah, a Hebrew phrase meaning "Not Loved". Another child received the name Lo-Ammi, Hebrew for "Not My People". The names expressed God's feelings about His deceitful bride, and indicated that God was ready to divorce His people.

Here is the marvel of who God is! Though He would *"expose her lewdness"* and would *"punish her for the days she burned incense to the Baals,"* yet, He says, *"I will ... speak tenderly to her.... She will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt."* In fact, declares the LORD, *"in that day ... you will call Me 'my husband'..."* (Hosea 2:10-16). How remarkable: God does not give up on unfaithful Israel, and does not renege on the promises He swore when He established His covenant with her!

Divorce

The prophet Jeremiah put the matter into even sharper terms. Concerning Israel's past the Lord said, *"I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved Me and followed Me through the desert, through a land not sown. Israel was holy to the LORD, the firstfruits of His harvest; all who devoured her were held guilty, and disaster overtook them."* Hence the Lord's puzzlement: *"What fault did your fathers find in Me, that they strayed so far*

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from Me? They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves.... Indeed, on every high hill and under every spreading tree you lay down as a prostitute" (Jeremiah 2:2-5, 20). So God finally gave the northern ten tribes a "certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries" (Jeremiah 3:8); God sent the northern tribes into exile. Yet even then the Lord God did not wash His hands of His faithless bride! Instead, He instructed Jeremiah to proclaim this message from God: "'Return, faithless Israel,' declares the LORD, 'I will frown on you no longer, for I am merciful,' declares the LORD, 'I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt – you have rebelled against the LORD your God, you have scattered your favors to foreign gods under every spreading tree, and have not obeyed Me,' declares the LORD" (3:11-13). How remarkable: God did not intend this divorce as a termination of His relationship with Israel, but as a means to impress on His bride how desperately she needed to repent and change her behavior. "'Return, faithless people,' declares the LORD, 'for I am your husband'" (3:14; see also Isaiah 54:5-8; 62:4,5).

Is this not why the Lord sent His Son into the world and rejected Him? Israel's sins, including their spiritual adultery, were placed onto Jesus Christ and then the judgment those sins deserved was poured out onto Him. On the cross the Lord God divorced Israel's Substitute, so that Jesus cried out, *"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"* (Matthew 27:46). Because He was rejected, Israel could be accepted – despite her transgressions! For Jesus' sake God remained faithful and merciful to His unfaithful bride.

New Testament

In the New Testament dispensation God still uses the imagery of marriage to describe His relation with His people. Jesus called Himself the 'bridegroom' (Matthew 9:15). Paul wrote to the Corinthians that *"I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to Him"* (2 Corinthians 11:2). Elsewhere he wrote that marriage is *"a profound mystery"*, for it refers to *"Christ and the church"* (Ephesians 5:32). John heard an enormous heavenly multitude rejoicing about the finished work of the Lord, *"Hallelujah! ... For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and His bride has made herself ready"* (Revelation 19:7; see also 21:2,9). Yet it's not so that the bride has within herself something that attracts the divine Bridegroom to her, for the New Testament church is no more faithful than was the Old Testament church. Instead, because of His sacrifice on Calvary for His bride, the Bridegroom Himself can give her *"fine linen, bright and clean ..., to wear"* (19:8).

The Lesson

How were the husbands and wives of Israel, now, to image this God? How are the husbands and wives of the New Testament dispensation to reflect

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in marriage what God is like? Can a Christian claim to image God when he (or she) is unfaithful to the spouse? And if the other party enters a relation with a third party, is the 'innocent' party free to wash his hands of the marriage? Inasmuch as God did not wash His hands of Israel but instead continued to carry out His responsibilities as husband to Israel, the husbands (and wives) of Israel were also not free to wash their hands of a wayward spouse.

INASMUCH AS GOD DID NOT WASH HIS HANDS OF ISRAEL, THE HUSBANDS OF ISRAEL WERE ALSO NOT FREE TO WASH THEIR HANDS OF A WAYWARD SPOUSE.

The same is true today. The Lord does not deal with His bride, the church, as she deserves; who would dare to claim that the church is today free of spiritual adultery, of putting her trust in gods of Reason or Wealth or Public Esteem, etc? As the Lord is so patient with His bride today and in mercy remains so faithful to His covenant promises, so husbands and wives are to be patient with the spouse and maintain the vows once voiced on the wedding day. David's word in Psalm 15 is instructive: "*LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill? He who ... keeps his oath even when it hurts...*," even as God Himself did in relation to His unfaithful bride. And the wonderful thing is that the people of God are made able to keep that oath. For the Holy Spirit has been poured out abundantly, and "*the fruit of the Spirit is love ..., patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness...*" (Galatians 5:22).

How permanent did God intend marriage to be? God intended marriage to be permanent, 'for as long as we both shall live'. Paul puts it like this: "*by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man*" (Romans 7:2,3). Malachi says the same thing in a most pointed manner: "*I hate divorce,' says the LORD God of Israel*" (2:16).

The Permanence of Marriage in Bible Texts

Do the separate Scripture texts that speak of marriage and divorce confirm or undermine the paradigm set by God Himself? We examine two Old Testament passages, and then turn to the New Testament.

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The Old Testament

It needs to be noted first that the Lord's Word nowhere commands divorce. The most one can say is that the Lord recognized that in this broken life divorce happens. He says, for example, that a priest *"must not marry ... a divorced woman"* (Leviticus 21:14; see also Leviticus 22:13; Numbers 30:9).

Deuteronomy 24

There is one text where the Lord gave particular instruction in relation to divorce. He gave this command:

"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, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD" (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

The Pharisees of Jesus' day read this passage to say that *"Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away"* (Mark 10:4), and even *"commanded"* a certificate of divorce (Matthew 19:7). That, however, is to read more into the passage than the passage permits. The Lord God did nothing more than regulate what is to happen in the event a divorce has occurred. Notice that the passage describes two conditions:

1. If husband A divorces his wife, and
2. If this woman marries again and husband B also divorces her (or dies), *then* (and this is now the law caught in this passage) husband A is not permitted to take this woman as wife again.

Moses (and the Lord God who inspired him) does not approve of divorce, but regulates an aspect of what can happen when one ends up in a situation of divorce. Jesus could explain the command of Deuteronomy 24 with these words, *"Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery"* (Matthew 19:8,9).

Ezra 9 and 10

Another passage of the Old Testament that needs attention in relation to the topic of marriage permanency is Ezra 9 and 10. After a number of the exiles returned from their captivity, many *"married foreign women"*

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(10:2,10,44). Ezra mobilized the people to “*make a covenant before our God to send away all these women and their children*” (10:3). Since Ezra’s action is described on the pages of Scripture as reformation and is done with God’s approval, does this passage not give support to divorce? In answer, note the following points:

- The Hebrew language has various ways of saying that persons were married in the sense of, say, Abraham and Sarah, but we do not find that sort of language in Ezra 9 and 10. Instead, we find in these two chapters a term (in 10:2,10,14,17,18) never used elsewhere in the bible in the context of marriage (with the exception of Nehemiah 13:23,27, where the context is the same as in Ezra 9 and 10). The term used means literally “cause to dwell”. We understand that one can “cause” a woman “to dwell” in one’s home without tying the knot of marriage.
- Beside the phrase “cause to dwell”, these two chapters also use the word “take” to describe what the men of Israel had done with these foreign women (9:2; 10:44). This second word is used various times in Scripture to describe the act of bringing *multiple* women into one’s home (see 2 Chronicles 11:21; 13:21; 24:3) or to take a woman without any reference to love (Judges 21:23). The word has something negative in it,⁹ and conveys the flavor of hunger.
- Again, the Hebrew language has a particular word for divorce (cf Deuteronomy 24:1-4). But that word is not used in Ezra 10; instead, we find a word that means “cause to go out”. We understand that one can also cause an unmarried woman to go out of one’s house.
- Once more, our translation speaks in these chapters of “wives” (9:2; 10:2,3,10,11,14,18, 19), and that prompts us to think of marriage. However, in Hebrew the word for “wife” is equally the word for “woman”; in Hebrew the term does not necessarily imply that one is married.
- 9:1 mentions that Israel acted according to “*the detestable practices*” of “*the neighboring peoples*” (the Canaanites, the Hittites, etc). If we are to assume that the exiles had established true marriages, the reference to the “*the detestable practices*” of “*the neighboring peoples*” becomes difficult to explain. For marrying cannot be considered a detestable practice, and marrying a pagan cannot be considered a detestable practice of *the Canaanites, the Hittites*, etc. What is detestable before God, though, is activity as adultery, sexual licentiousness, marital unfaithfulness, habits common amongst the Canaanites, the Hittites, etc.
- Where the text in English speaks of marriage, the term has been laid into the text by the translators. In 9:2 the NKJV places the words “as wives” in cursive script (the NIV and ESV simply incorporate the words into the English text). The cursive script indicates that those two words

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"as wives" is not present in the original Hebrew, and have been added by the translators in an effort to give greater clarity to the text. The text itself simply says that the people of Israel *"have taken some of their daughters for themselves and their sons."* The reference to marriage in 9:14 is part of Ezra's summary of God's law, and not necessarily descriptive of what was specifically happening in Israel at the time.

These observations lead to the conclusion that the last two chapters of Ezra do not tell us about men of Israel who had married women of the surrounding nations in the formal sense of the term, and then divorced them on God's command. These last two chapters tell us instead that some men of Israel, maybe already married and maybe not, took foreign women into their homes and beds. We could say these women were concubines. So Ezra's reforming work was understandable: send these women away. The passage, then, cannot be used to challenge the notion that marriage is somehow not 'till death us do part'.

JESUS DROVE HIS POINT HOME WITH A REFERENCE TO GOD'S CREATING WORK.

The New Testament

There are two passages from the New Testament that need our particular attention. These two passages parallel the two grounds for divorce mentioned in the Westminster Confession.

Matthew 19

The Pharisees once asked Jesus, *"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"* (Matthew 19:3). This question arose out of a dispute between two rabbis, Shammai and Hillel, over what were to be regarded as lawful reasons for divorce. The one permitted limited grounds for divorce, while the other tolerated divorce even on such frivolous grounds as burning the supper. In His reply, Jesus appealed to Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:24: *"Haven't you read ... that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate"* (Matthew 19:4-6). With this reply Jesus found fault with both schools of thought. God, He insisted, did not create an emergency exit out of marriage.

The Pharisees countered with a further question: *"Why then did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"*¹⁰ To this question Jesus replied, *"Moses permitted you to divorce your*

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wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning" (Matthew 19:7,8). Notice how Jesus drove His point home with a reference to God's creating work: from the beginning God intended marriage to be permanent.

Must all who marry, then, forever remain married 'till death us do part', irrespective of the sins and weaknesses that can plague that marriage – or, for that matter, the devastation illness or accident can cause? Jesus was undoubtedly aware of the pain that follows from brokenness. Yet Jesus' position is categorical: *"I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery"* (Matthew 19:9). Mark and Luke record similar words from Jesus' mouth, be it without the phrase 'except for marital unfaithfulness' (see Mark 10:11,12; Luke 16:18). Their lack of the words 'except for marital unfaithfulness' makes clear that the arrival of a third party into a marriage relation (even after divorce!) always constitutes adultery. Terminating one's marriage for any reason and starting again with another spouse is as certainly adultery as bringing the third party into the relation before divorce. Similarly, whoever divorces his wife *"causes her to become an adulteress"* (Matthew 5:32), for in Jesus' day there was no such thing as social security as we know it, and so the divorced woman was effectively driven into the arms of another man simply to survive. How great the responsibility of the divorcing husband!

What, then, are we to make of the exceptive clause as found in Matthew 19:9 (and 5:31,32)? Do Jesus' words *"except for marital unfaithfulness"* not leave room for divorce? Indeed, it does. As the Lord God divorced Israel in Jeremiah 3 on account of her adultery, so the people of Israel could divorce an unfaithful spouse. For centuries the church has understood from Jesus' words that adultery is a lawful ground for divorce.

Does the Lord in this text also give permission for the person who divorces on grounds of adultery to marry another? It has been so said. However, a number of grounds argue against this understanding:

- This is the only text conceivably supporting remarriage (to a third party) after divorce based on adultery.
- The Greek construction of the so-called exceptive clause in Matthew 19:9 is literally 'not for marital unfaithfulness'; the translation *"except for marital unfaithfulness"* is forced. This makes one question whether the phrase actually ought to be translated as an exception clause.¹¹ To be clear, it should be noted that the Greek of Matthew 5:32 is substantially different than the Greek of Matthew 19:9 (a fact which does not come through in the English translations).
- Paul explains Jesus' instruction with these words: *"To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her*

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husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife" (1 Corinthians 7:10,11). With the phrase "*not I, but the Lord*" Paul is saying that his instruction in this passage is built squarely on Jesus' instruction, an instruction the Corinthians can verify from those who have heard Christ teach. Over the years this teaching has been written down in the four Gospels. Our conclusion from reading Jesus' instruction in Matthew 19 and related passages may not differ from Paul's inspired conclusion.

- We can add to this list the historical understanding of the church fathers as well as the paradigm of God's example as discussed above.

From such considerations it would follow that one ought not to build on this single text the conclusion that a person divorced on grounds of adultery is free before God to marry again. Though such a conclusion certainly runs contrary to the wishes and hopes we may have for each other, we need to let Scripture interpret itself, and so read the more difficult passages in light of the easier passages and indeed of Scripture in its entirety.

The vow one voiced at the wedding, then, to remain faithful till death us do part, remains valid even after a legitimate divorce. Though the two have fallen out and come to a parting of ways, God's example for His people is that they continue to pray for each other, and, as opportunity presents itself, still reach out to the other with the ultimate goal of reconciliation.

The Case of the Unbelieving Spouse

The other Scripture passage used to argue that marriage is not by definition permanent is 1 Corinthians 7:15. Through the apostle's preaching some of the city's pagan population came to faith in Jesus Christ, while others did not. Tensions invariably arose in marriages where one spouse was converted, for the believing partner was no longer the person he used to be; his conversion changed him both in relation to his attitudes and in relation to his conduct. What, now, were those believers to do when the unbelieving spouse wished to walk out of the marriage? Paul's advice was this:

"To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is

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not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?" (I Corinthians 7:12-16).

With these words Paul made clear to his readers that the Lord Jesus, during His time on earth, had given no command specific to a situation as had now developed in Corinth. Paul, therefore, had to develop his answer from Jesus' general instruction, plus work with what God had revealed in Old Testament Scripture concerning marriage. He had already made clear in verses 10 and 11 (quoted above) that marriage is permanent, with no emergency exit. With that in mind, Paul went on to say that if your unbelieving spouse was willing to live with you, leave it that way; do not divorce. However, if the unbelieving spouse insisted on leaving the Christian spouse, let him go; after all, all you gain by attempting to force him to stay is friction – and *"God has called us to live in peace"* (verse 15). Paul's point was not that now you are free to divorce (that would be contrary to his instruction in verses 10 and 11); his point was instead that *"a believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances"* to force the unbelieving spouse to stay home or even move in with the unbelieving spouse at his new address. Nor is the believer compelled to resist tooth and nail any divorce attempt on the part of the unbelieving spouse. You may need to acquiesce to life's brokenness. Acquiescing to divorce, of course, is a totally different thing than pursuing divorce yourself. The apostle has simply forbidden the latter.

Does Paul's answer mean that the divorced person no longer has an obligation to the ex-spouse? Granted, legally a divorce may terminate a marriage in the sense that no responsibilities remain to the previous spouse. But the indications of Scripture are that the divorced person retains moral obligations towards the ex-spouse. God established the bond of marriage for life. God's example was to call even His divorced people to repentance. The unity of marriage may be broken by a divorce, but the need to pray for the ex-spouse's repentance (and conversion) remains. In short, the vow once uttered at the marriage ceremony continues to bind the divorced person to his ex-spouse.

Conclusion

"Nothing shall separate them in this life," the Form had said. *"Marriage is an institution of God and should not be broken,"* the Form had added. *"Since God has made marriage such a strong bond, He hates divorce,"* the Form insisted. A godly young man and a pious young woman seek to be united in holy wedlock, but the sheer permanence of the institution they enter can itself seem oppressive; what if it doesn't work out?! *"For as long as you both shall*

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live”: that’s such a terribly long time! We’re inclined to echo the disciples’ response to Jesus’ instruction: *“If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry”* (Matthew 19:10).

**THE UNITY OF MARRIAGE MAY BE BROKEN BY A
DIVORCE, BUT THE NEED TO PRAY FOR THE EX-SPOUSE’S
REPENTANCE (AND CONVERSION) REMAINS.**

Jesus’ reply to the disciples is so very encouraging for those who seek to marry in the Lord. *“Not everyone can accept this word,”* Jesus said, *“but only those to whom it has been given”* (Matthew 19:11). Those to whom it has been given are those fallen creatures who have been regenerated by the Spirit of the triumphant Christ. Though they are by nature given to selfishness, they have been changed to reflect again what God is like, and so the godly bridegroom and bride can deny self to serve the other. For each other’s benefit in marriage they can bring forth such fruit of the Spirit as *“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”* (Galatians 5:22,23). Whether one faces in marriage the ravages of adultery or addictions, or perhaps the devastation of accident or illness, one trusts that the God who gave His only Son for our sins will in Him give us all we need (Romans 8:32). This God is faithful. Though the cross He in wisdom may give His people to carry may be heavy, His grace will always be sufficient (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Points for Discussion:

1. Evaluate Erasmus’ contention that empathy for those living in strained marriages ought to make divorce and remarriage acceptable. What would the implication be for those whose spouse has become bed-ridden through illness or accident? How does Erasmus’ thinking square with God’s word in Romans 5:3-5 and James 1:2,3?
2. What is meant by the phrase ‘image of God’? Explain how being “true” to one’s spouse “always, in good days and bad, in riches and poverty, in health and sickness, for as long as you both shall live” reflects what God is like. Is this an attainable expectation in a fallen world?
3. Tension will certainly arise in every marriage. In the light of God’s example with Israel, discuss what a couple needs to do to overcome friction.
4. The prophet Ezekiel gave Israel-in-exile a number of lessons in Bible history. Read through Ezekiel 16 and 23 for two such accounts. What do these two chapters say about:

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- a. Israel's worthiness to be loved in her youth?
 - b. Israel's faithfulness in her marriage?
 - c. God's response to Israel's conduct?
5. How does one go about training our boys and girls so that in marriage they will be faithful to each other even in days of intense adversity and friction?
 6. In light of the material presented in this chapter, evaluate what the Westminster Confession says about divorce and remarriage. Similarly, in light of the Westminster Confession, evaluate what this chapter has said about divorce and remarriage. Ensure that your evaluation happens on the basis of an open Bible.
 7. Dr. C. vanDam in his book *Divorce and Remarriage* (Winnipeg: Premier Publishing, 1996) comes to different conclusions than I have. Read and evaluate his arguments in the light of the material presented in this chapter. Similarly, evaluate the material of this chapter in the light of his arguments.
 8. What message does the unbelieving world around us receive from Christians who pledge on their wedding day to be faithful to each other till death part them, and yet after some years terminate their marriage and begin a new relationship? What perception does such action generate about the God of these Christians? Does this help or hinder mission and outreach?

⁷ For more detail on these historical data, the reader is referred to Arthur van Delden, *For as Long as You Both Shall Live: a Scriptural and Historical Study of Remarriage after Divorce*, Kelm-scott: Pro Ecclesia, 1998.

⁸ Acts Synod Amersfoort, Article 57. The Dutch original reads as follows:

1. Het huwelijk is door de Here ingesteld. Deze hechte band tussen man en vrouw mag niet door mensen ontbonden worden (Gen. 2:24; Mal. 2:14-16; Mat. 19:3-9; 1 Kor. 7:10-11). Echtscheiding is een ernstig kwaad, dat zoveel mogelijk voorkomen en bestreden moet worden. Leven naar de stijl van het koninkrijk van Christus betekent dat we bij alle huwelijksmoeiten inzetten op verzoening en herstel van de relatie.

2. Indien een huwelijk ten gevolge van zonden of door de gevolgen van de zondeval is aangestast, dient in navolging van Christus middels berouw, vergeving en verzoening gestreefd te worden naar het herstel van de huwelijksband en/of in de weg van zelfverloochening de huwelijksband zoveel mogelijk te worden bewaard. Daarbij kan echter blijken dat in een echtscheiding moet worden berust.

3. In geval van de feitelijke beëindiging van de huwelijksband past het het meest bij de stijl van het koninkrijk van Christus het huwelijk formeel in stand te laten en te kiezen voor een oplossing waarbij de partners onderling afspraken maken en (doen) vastleggen of voor scheiding van tafel en bed.

4. Ook in de hiervoor bedoelde situaties blijft de gegeven trouwbelofte van kracht, zolang de beide echtgenoten in leven zijn. Daarom past hertrouwen na een scheiding in principe niet bij de stijl van het koninkrijk van Christus.

5. De kerkelijke bevestiging van een opvolgend huwelijk is in de regel niet mogelijk indien het voorafgaande huwelijk door echtscheiding is ontbonden.

⁹ This leaves only Ruth 1:4, a passage that describes marriages patently contrary to God's command. Hence there is room here too for a negative connotation.

¹⁰ See the earlier discussion on Deuteronomy 24.

¹¹ See further A vanDelden, *As Long as You Both Shall Live* (Armada: Pro Ecclesia, 1998), pg 55-66; 145-152.

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Immorality and Marriage

The couple wishing to marry have thus far heard about the origin and the permanence of marriage. The Form next draws their attention to what God says in His Word about immorality. It does so with reference to 1 Corinthians 6:19,20 and 7:2. The latter passage is directly quoted in the Form, as follows:

The Institution of Marriage

"As the Lord forbids immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband, so that our bodies may be preserved as temples of the Holy Spirit and we may glorify God in our bodies."

The brevity with which the Marriage Form refers to immorality ought not to prompt the conclusion that immorality has but little bearing on marriage. On the contrary, there is ample Biblical evidence demonstrating that immorality is devastating to marriage. Solomon impressed on his sons the need to stay away from the *"immoral woman"* because of the damage that results: *"Do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes, for the prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread, and the adulteress preys upon your very life"* (Proverbs 6:24-26; see also Proverbs 5:8-10). Experience confirms how devastating immorality is upon marriage, be it one's own marriage or one's partner's (or victim's) marriage. Before a man or woman enters the married state, he or she does well to repent before God and fiancé(e) of sins of the past. It's to this sensitive subject that the Form now draws our attention.

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1 Corinthians 7:1-7

The passage from which the Form quotes forms part of a larger paragraph. To understand its message, we do well to read the entire passage. It reads as follows:¹²

1 Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman. 2 But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband. 3 The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. 4 The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. 5 Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. 6 But this I say by way of concession, not of command. 7 Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that.

At first read, verse 2 seems to teach that God would have people marry in order to restrain immorality. On this understanding, the text would recognize that we have a sex drive, and that marriage is the place to satisfy this drive. The implication is that within marriage anything goes. This understanding does not do justice to what Paul writes, and does not conform to what the Bible teaches elsewhere.

The Problem

The city of Corinth in Paul's day was internationally known for its infatuation with sexuality. So well-known was Corinth for its sexual perversity that a new verb was coined to describe fornication: to *corinthize*. When Paul in 1 Corinthians 6 wrote about the backgrounds of some of the local Christians, he mentioned that some used to be sexually immoral, some had been adulterers, some male prostitutes and some homosexuals (vs 9). It was indeed a city of licentiousness.

To this perverse city the Lord God sent His servant Paul to preach the gospel of redemption. By God's grace, several Corinthians came to faith. Some of these were already married, while others presumably were not. The conversion of these Corinthians understandably had a major impact on their marriage, including their thoughts in relation to sexuality. Paul answered many of their questions in the 18 months that he labored in Corinth (Acts 18:11), while other questions came to Paul via letter after his departure. Paul's answer to

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one of their written questions is given in 1 Corinthians 7:1-7.

The kernel of the section is caught in the command of vs 5a: *"stop depriving one another."* As is clear from the context, the reference is to sexual activity between husband and wife in marriage. From this apostolic command it's also obvious that some of the Christian husbands and wives in Corinth were in fact refusing to give themselves to their spouse sexually. Perhaps they reacted to the sexism of Corinthian society and considered that the Christian should rise above something so earthly as sex. The reaction of the spouse is predictable: if he (or she) were unbelieving, his disappointment in the home could lead him to the prostitutes of town (see 1 Corinthians 6:16f), and blame the Christian spouse for driving him to this extreme. If he were a Christian too, his frustration could leave him open to Satan's temptation, as Paul recognizes in vs 5b. In the face of this struggle, the Corinthian church had asked Paul via letter about the propriety, or lack thereof, for a man to touch a woman (vs 1).

The Answer

In his reply, the apostle grants that indeed *"it is good for a man not to touch a woman."* Sex, after all, is not what life is all about. So, if the Lord has given you grace to remain unmarried (see Matthew 19:12), good and well; *"it is good for them to stay unmarried"* (see vs 8,9). To the married, however, the apostle has a much different instruction. In the beginning God created the human race with the mandate to *"rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground"* (Genesis 1:26), and that includes that one was to rule over ones own hormones. The Lord God gave Adam and Eve the gift of marriage, and with marriage the gift of sexual relations (Genesis 2:24). This first married couple was fully able to control all their feelings and activities so that their relations together conformed fully to God's will for them.

The fall into sin damaged so very much, including the ability to use the gift of sexuality perfectly and so to be for the other what God wanted a bride and groom to be. In a fallen world, depriving each other is a reality, and so is selfishness and lack of self-control – all of which can lead to immorality. So Paul gives the instruction of vs 2: *"but because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband."* The verb 'have' in this sentence does not mean that each man is to 'obtain' his own wife (and vice versa), as is evident from the fact that those whom Paul is addressing here were already married. Instead, in this sentence the verb 'have' refers to embracing, to sexual relations. As the apostle explains in vs 3: *"the husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband."*

The phrase translated as 'fulfill his duty' is striking. The Lord Jesus Christ used the same phrase in His parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18:21-

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35), when the one servant demanded of the other, *"Pay back what you owe me!"* (vs 28). Husband and wife are also to 'pay' each other what they 'owe' to each other. Yet whereas in Jesus' parable the demand was for a onetime and immediate payment of the debt, Paul speaks of an ongoing and repeated payment of the debt in marriage. What is this debt? And how is it paid?

**LETTING ONESELF BE THE 'MORE', BE THE 'EXTENSION',
BE 'TAKEN UP IN THE OTHER' IS THE DEBT THAT EACH
MARRIED PERSON 'OWES' THE SPOUSE.**

Debt

In the beginning the Lord instituted marriage as a result of His divine determination that *"it is not good for the man to be alone"* (Genesis 2:18). He fashioned a helper for the man not from dust, nor from an animal, but from a rib He took from the man. The man in turn exalted, *"This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man"* (Genesis 2:23). The Holy Spirit added, *"for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh"* (Genesis 2:24). The fact that they *"become one flesh"* is not a reference to sexuality first of all, but a description of God's ordinance concerning the married; as Eve was Adam's flesh (quite literally), so all married couples are 'one flesh'. Though in one sense they remain two persons (and the eye very much sees it that way), in another sense they become one person, with each being taken up in the other, each understanding the other, each living for the other, each being an extension of the other, each being more of the other. Letting oneself be the 'more', be the 'extension', be 'taken up in the other' is the debt that each married person 'owes' the spouse.

In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul draws out something of what this oneness looks like, and hence what paying the debt looks like. Paul recalled the words of the Holy Spirit in Genesis 2:24, and in that context writes, *"Husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church"* (Ephesians 5:28-31). When Paul speaks here of ones *"own body,"* he's referring not to the self but to the spouse. God has made husband and wife one in marriage, and so the husband needs to care for his wife as for his own body – because she *is* his; the two are one. That's the debt he owes her; he must care for her, empty himself for her benefit, seek her good, and ensure that she thrives as a result of his devotion.

Paul's instruction to the married of Corinth was this: *"the husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband"* (1

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Corinthians 7:3). The God-given debt husband owes wife and wife owes husband is that they be one, that they live for the other, that they care for the other as they care for themselves. This is what Christ did for His bride when He *"did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many"* (Matthew 20:28; see also Ephesians 5:25-27).

In the thoroughly sexualized city of Corinth, some Christians considered sexual relations beneath their regenerated dignity and so declined to give themselves to the spouse. Paul condemns that position. He grants that sex is not what life (or marriage) is all about. Instead, he insists that marriage is all about serving the other, and denying the self in the process. Yet refusing to give oneself in sexual intimacy is insisting on one's own way, and does not take into account the needs of the other. Hence Paul's instruction: keep paying the debt you owe to each other, keep being sensitive to each other's needs, keep serving the other and looking after the other – and in the circumstances that means that these Corinthians need to *"stop depriving one another"*.

Other Centered

To underline his message to the Corinthians, the apostle adds also the words of vs 4: *"The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does."* That statement follows directly from the Lord's instruction in Genesis 2 that husband and wife are one flesh. In a Christian marriage, neither party owns the self. In a Christian marriage, both parties belong to the other, both live for the other, and both empty the self for the benefit of the other.

The principle of denying the self for the benefit of the other, of course, cuts two ways, and applies equally to those who insist selfishly on sexual gratification. In Christian marriage there is no place for *take* or *demand*; there is only place for *give* and hence *receive*. That is why it's so wrong to think that once one is married one can do what you will to satisfy your sex drive. Immorality is very much possible *within* marriage, and it happens when the one *demand*s the other, *takes* the other.

That in turn is why this short paragraph about immorality and marriage is so very fitting in the Marriage Form, located as it is before the marriage is solemnized. It is good that those who marry understand well that, when God gives the gift of marriage, He does not at the same time give the couple permission to satisfy every craving they may have. On the contrary, in marriage every part of their being is to be directed to the spouse's edification.

This obviously requires a measure of self-control and self-denial. These are disciplines we do well to cultivate in ourselves and in our children from childhood.

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1 Corinthians 6:19,20

To our sinful minds and with our disappointed experiences, Paul's instruction may seem like an impossible ideal. How encouraging it is, then, that the Form mentions in this context the outpouring of the Holy Spirit! With reference to 1 Corinthians 6:19,20, the Form reminds those who marry in the Lord that our bodies are "*temples of the Holy Spirit.*" That fallen sinners are made homes for the Holy Spirit is certainly a privilege beyond compare, and under no circumstance should one unite oneself in marriage to a person who is not a home for the Spirit. Still, the challenge for Christians who marry is that they act in a fashion consistent with their noble identity. Paul insists that God's people, exactly because they are "*temples of the Holy Spirit,*" need to "*flee from sexual immorality*" (1 Corinthians 6:18) and instead must "*honor God with your body*" (vs 20).

From Paul's words to the Galatians we receive clearer indication of what fitting conduct in marriage looks like. The child of God is to "*live by the Spirit,*" and in so doing "*you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature*" (Galatians 5:16). The "*acts of the sinful nature*" that you will no longer gratify "*are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ...hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions...*" (vss 19,20). The common denominator in Paul's list of vices is selfishness. Conversely, "*the fruit of the Spirit*" whose temple you are "*is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*" (vss 22,23). A husband and wife who take seriously their identity as temples of the Holy Spirit will approach their sexual intimacy much differently than the couple who do not know themselves changed by the Holy Spirit.

Again, in his letter to the Thessalonians Paul lays the matter out clearly for his readers. "*It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God.... He who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you His Holy Spirit*" (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8). Given that we have received Christ's Holy Spirit, we are called and are made able to control our urges so that we use the gift of sexual intimacy for the encouragement of the other instead of demanding satisfaction for the self.

This self-denial and service to the other is not something one masters easily. Also when it comes to sexual intimacy "*even the holiest have only a small beginning*" of the obedience God requires (Lord's Day 44.114). Here is one area of life where husband and wife carry out their respective roles as leader and helper to stand beside and support each other in their struggles. "*While praying to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit,*" they together "*never stop striving to be renewed more and more after God's image*" – also in the

most intimate aspects of their marriage relation (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord's Day 44.115).

Two Vital Spin-offs

The brief reference to immorality in the Marriage Form gives occasion to consider two other matters that pertain to immorality. The first concerns being a victim of another's immoral behavior, and the second concerns being guilty of immoral behavior. These two should be mentioned at this point, for both have a profound effect on one's ability to serve the spouse with one's whole being.

Victim of Immoral Behavior

The Lord God created the gift of sex as a wonderful means of communicating love within holy wedlock. Too often, however, persons have been subjected to sexual stimulation before marriage – and that can do (and in many cases has done) incalculable damage. It's as if through premature sexual stimulation wires were pulled from their connectors and plugged in elsewhere, so that you don't know anymore what buttons to push to make the appliance work. What God made so beautiful is warped and damaged. That leads to all sorts of frustrations within marriage, both for the abused person and the spouse. Specifically, it makes carrying out the instruction of 1 Corinthians 7:1-5 exceedingly difficult, and leaves oneself and the spouse open to Satan's temptations.

Openness

It is imperative that one is open and honest with one's fiancé(e) before one gets married. The damage caused by sexual invasions in one's youth will invariably come to the surface sooner or later, no matter how hard you try to keep it secret. If it comes to the surface some months or years into your marriage, you will need at that time to deal with the damage done years ago, and the spouse will too. More, the spouse will also have to come to grips at that time with the pain that comes with your not having been open with him (or her) earlier in the piece – and that pain will definitely be acute. To head off bigger struggles down the road, it is necessary to be fully upfront on past experiences before getting married.

Speaking about the abuse before getting married will not automatically fix what's broken. Then again, sex is not what marriage is ultimately about. One who is physically handicapped (a paraplegic, for example) can under God's blessing be happily married and the spouse be happy too, even though they daily need to contend with life's brokenness. The same can be true for those who have been abused, or whom God has joined in marriage to a person once broken through abuse.

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Coming to grips with past abuse

As one strives to come to grips with the abuse one experienced (or one's spouse experienced), the following three points must, at a minimum, be covered. In the first place, Paul's word of comfort in Romans 8 needs to remain foremost in the minds of those struggling with the scars of abuse. The apostle speaks to people who have fallen with Adam into sin and so are all, in a manner of speaking, already wrongly wired; all are depraved, to say it in confessional language. Yet the Lord God gave His only Son to reconcile broken sinners to God, and this Son today intercedes with God for the benefit of God's people. In that context, Paul raises this rhetorical question: *"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?"* (8:35). Note especially the reference to 'nakedness'. Paul is empathic: even the abuse we've experienced, with all its resulting pain and frustration, cannot in itself stop Christ from loving us. In the midst of the pain resulting from sexual abuse, this is a promise we may embrace in faith.

**IN THE MIDST OF THE PAIN RESULTING FROM
SEXUAL ABUSE, THIS IS A PROMISE WE MAY
EMBRACE IN FAITH.**

In second place, the Lord our God sovereignly leads our lives along paths of His choosing in order to make us the person He wants us to be. So Paul can say earlier in the same passage, *"in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose"* (Romans 8:28). At first reading the emotional abuse Joseph experienced from his brothers when they sold him (Genesis 37) and the sexual abuse he experienced from Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39) both seem so senseless. Yet Joseph, by God's grace, trusted God's goodness as he traveled through those deep valleys, and so could reassure his brothers many years later that *"God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance"* (Genesis 45:7). After their father's death, Joseph could be even more pointed to his brothers, *"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives"* (Genesis 50:20). This trust in God's sovereignty and goodness allowed Joseph to accept in peace the difficult circumstances of his life, and still bear rich fruit for God's glory. As the prospective bride and groom digest together what God in His wisdom has put on their path, this is a confession they together do well to make their own before they marry. And after they have entered the married state, this is a confession they will need to continue to hold before each

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other as they keep struggling with the pain of the damage once done.

Thirdly, it is so tempting in the midst of frustration and hurt to feel anger against the wrongdoer of yesteryear. Through an emotional jump, that anger can become directed to the spouse, with fatal consequences for enjoyment in sexual intimacy. Yet the Lord God would not have us harbor anger at all. We are not responsible for what happens to us, but we certainly are responsible for how we respond to what happens to us. David in Psalm 35 describes the God-pleasing model, *"They repay me evil for good and leave my soul forlorn. Yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting.... I bowed my head in grief as though weeping for my mother"* (vss 12-14). Though they had hurt David deeply, David's response was one of love for the wrongdoer and prayer on his behalf. This anticipates the model the Lord God Himself set for us in giving His only Son for our sins. Though we had hurt Him deeply through rejecting Him in Paradise, He nevertheless gave His most precious possession for our salvation. Hence the instruction of Paul: *"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you"* (Colossians 3:12,13). The forgiving the apostle speaks of in this passage is not a one-time forgiving, but can be an ongoing and repeated thing as memories and pain resurface again and again. Here too the young couple will need to speak much with each other about their feelings and frustrations, understand each other and encourage each other in the way the Lord wants them to go.

Ultimately, all those who marry, irrespective of personal history, shall need to confess daily the rich promises of God as captured in Lord's Day 1 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*,

"I am not my own, but belong with body (!) and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil. He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things (!) must work together for my salvation. Therefore, by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him."

With the help of the Lord in whom bridegroom and bride both believe, so much of the pain that has come from past abuse can be greatly alleviated and pleasure be found in each other's arms. Together bridegroom and bride can also look forward to the day when God *"will wipe every tear from their eyes,"* the day when *"there will be no more ... crying or pain"* (Revelation

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21:4). Meanwhile, they can reflect already something of the relation between Christ and His church.

Guilty of Immoral Behavior

The Lord created the gift of sex as a means for husband and wife to communicate love within marriage. By God's providence, however, sexual appetite regularly awakens some years before one gets married. Though Solomon told his sons (and all young people in Israel and around the world) to avoid the immoral woman and control oneself (eg, Proverbs 5, 6, 7), countless young people throughout the ages have given in to their urges in one way or another, be it with pornography, masturbation, nightclubbing, fornication, homosexual activity, etc. The question arises whether the marrying couple should tell each other of their past improprieties.

The temptation not to speak of it is great. There's something embarrassing about sharing these sins of youth. And should the past not be the past? Has God not forgiven?

It is imperative that the couple be open with each other, and keep no secrets even in matters as sensitive as this. One's body is not for oneself, but for the spouse God may one day give. Sexual sins of youth are then not simply one's personal business, but also the business of the spouse God gives some years after the event. Though you did not yet know the bride (or groom) God would give, sexual sin was already sin against her (or him). That becomes the more evident when we realize that dirt has a way of sitting in the back of your mind and becoming a vivid memory in an intimate moment – and suddenly in your mind there's a third party in the bedroom. Honesty demands that this be no secret between the two who by God's ordinance shall become one flesh, one being.

Furthermore, dirty laundry has a nasty way of cropping up in unexpected ways. A victim may years after the abuse occurred still go to the police. An adoption agency may let you know that a child wants to establish contact with a parent. The doctor may find unexpected damage from a past abortion. When such secrets crop up, the wrongdoer will still need to confront his ghost. More, the spouse will have a double blow to digest, for he (or she) will have to come to grips with the smut on your record *plus* your lack of truthfulness on the topic. The latter will be seen as a form of betrayal, and make for very difficult and tense days. To head off that possibility, it is essential that the couple be open with each other about past immoral behavior before they marry.

Yet more is needed than openness concerning past sins. Repentance is the mark of a Christian, and the freedom that comes with repentance is something one delights to share with those one loves. Repentance involves acknowledging sin before God, seeking His forgiveness, and being assured that

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God has washed that sin away – and so one exalts in God’s goodness. It involves also making amends to the person you hurt, and taking full responsibility for the wrong you did, including perhaps an offer of compensation. This too cannot remain hidden from your fiancé(e).

Conclusion

Marriage is a gracious gift of God to man and woman, and within the sphere of this gift God has added the privilege of sexual intimacy (a topic to which we’ll return in chapter 11). It is His will that husband and wife enjoy this gift deeply. Through our fall into sin we have done incalculable damage to the gift of intimacy, so that it has become difficult to control one’s drive and use it fully for the benefit of the other. As we struggle over the years with our weaknesses, we can do so much damage that in turn generates profound pain down the track.

How rich, then, is the gospel of God’s mercy! In deep compassion for sinners He gave His Son to pay for sins, including our transgressions involving His gift of sexuality. He’s also promised to work all things for our good, turning even our sexual misdemeanors into opportunities for growth in Him. For it is written, *“suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope”* (Romans 5:3,4). To top it off, our Lord Jesus Christ gives us today His Holy Spirit so that we may be renewed and enabled to use His good gifts as He intended. How abundant is His goodness! And with what gratitude shall we use His gift for the purpose He intended!

Points for Discussion:

1. The topic of this chapter was immorality. Is it possible to act immorally within marriage? How? What are the parameters that make sexual activity within marriage moral or immoral?
2. In a marriage relationship, who owns whose body? What does that perspective mean for sexual relations within marriage?
3. How do we teach future husbands and wives to deny self for the spouse’s benefit in eventual marriage? What does this mean for young people’s struggles with masturbation and/or pornography? For that matter, what does it mean for masturbation or even pornography in marriage?
4. Evaluate the appropriateness of a word as ‘take’ in marriage, versus a word as ‘give’ and a word as ‘receive’. How does this concretely affect your relation with your spouse?

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5. What effect can past abuse have in a marriage relationship? Is openness to the spouse about past sexual experiences really always necessary? Explain your answer.
6. We are not responsible for what happens to us, but are certainly responsible for how we respond to what happens to us. How would the Lord God have us respond to being abused? How would He have us respond to a spouse that was abused? Or to her abuser?
7. What does forgiving one's abuser look like? What role does the spouse play in this? Is the spouse to expect the victim of abuse just to 'get over it'? Explain your answers.
8. What does repentance for past wrongdoing (in relation to abuse) look like?

¹² The translation of 1 Corinthians 7:1-7 is questionable in several modern versions. Of the major contemporary English translations available, the *New American Standard Bible* is closest to the original Greek and therefore used in this pericope.

CHAPTER SIX

The Profound Mystery

With preliminary material in relation to marriage now out of the way, the Form for the Solemnization of Marriage moves on to address the marrying couple about the very essence of what marriage is. It does so not by asking the reader to observe the marriages of various saints of Scripture (be it after the fall or even before the fall), but by holding before bridegroom and bride the relation between Christ and the church. Says the Form:

The Profound Mystery

"The apostle Paul teaches us that the unity of husband and wife in marriage is a profound mystery, reflecting the relationship between Christ and His church."

In further words on the subject, the Form will draw out in more detail how the husband and the wife reflect the relation between Christ and the church. We'll come back to that in following chapters.

Meanwhile, if we are to understand what the Form says about the role of husband and wife in marriage, we shall first need to come to grips with the passage of Scripture the Form alludes to. The passage comes from Ephesians 5, where the Holy Spirit has moved Paul to write these words:

"Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, His body, of which He is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her to make her holy,

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cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to Himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church – for we are members of His body. 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband" (Ephesians 5:22-33).

Why might it be that the apostle (and hence the Form) mentions as template for the Christian marriage not the relation of Adam and Eve in Paradise, but instead the relation between Christ and the church? We may be fallen creatures and therefore unable to measure up to the standards of Adam and Eve, but at least theirs was a real, human marriage – something, surely, that can't be said of the ascended Christ and His catholic church!

Paul answers the question for us with his reference to *"a profound mystery"* in Ephesians 5:32. The word 'mystery' in Scripture does not describe a suspense novel, nor does it refer to something that only the initiated can understand. Instead, the term captures the notion that the Lord had not in time past revealed the depths of what He is now revealing. This connection between what was hidden in time past but is today revealed is clearly evident in Paul's words to the Corinthians: *"Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed"* (1 Corinthians 15:51). And in another place, *"I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers"* (Romans 11:25), and Paul through the Spirit proceeds to explain openly what the Spirit had not made clear in the Old Testament. Again, Paul tells the Ephesians that God mandated him to proclaim *"the mystery made known to me by revelation."* Concerning this mystery Paul adds that it *"was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets."* Then Paul explains what the mystery is: *"This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus"* (Ephesians 3:2-6). When Paul, then, uses the term 'mystery' in relation to marriage, he does not direct us to think of something secretive or hard to understand. There's nothing in the vegetation of the forest at 7 o'clock in the morning that wasn't there at 4 o'clock, but the arrival of sunlight has now made the trees visible. With the coming of Jesus Christ, something that was true of marriage already in the Old Testament has now become obviously apparent. The

"profound mystery", then, of which Paul speaks is clearly understandable and describable. What this mystery is? To understand Paul's point we need to return to the institution of marriage in the beginning.

Not Good to be Alone

It was *"not good,"* God had said after He created Adam, *"for the man to be alone"* (Genesis 2:18). Why was Adam's aloneness not *"good"* in the eyes of God?

Earlier on that sixth day of creation God had determined to *"make man in our image, in our likeness,"* together with the commission to *"rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground"* (Genesis 1:26). The man God created carried out this task perfectly; he reflected what God was like in the way he ruled over the creatures of God's world. Yet he imaged God *as an isolated individual* (for he was alone), and that did not do full justice to what God was like. For almighty God is not 'alone'. When He voiced His intent to create man He spoke of Himself in the plural: *"our image"* and *"our likeness"*. With the benefit of God's later revelation elsewhere in Scripture, the church has understood that God's use of the plural form *"our"* in Genesis 1 is a reference to the Trinity; God is incomprehensibly one Being in three Persons.¹³ From further pages of Holy Scripture we receive glimpses of how the Father, Son and Holy Spirit interact. The Father *"loves"* the Son (John 3:35), *"sent"* the Son into the world (John 3:17), and *"gave"* His Son (John 3:16). The Son *"loves"* the Father (John 14:31), *"does the will"* of the Father (John 4:34). The Son also *"poured out"* the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:33). We even read that the Son is the *"image"* of the Father (Colossians 1:15), so that Jesus could tell His disciples that *"anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father"* (John 14:9). All of it speaks of the chemistry between the three Persons of the Godhead, a chemistry that in some way serves as template for how people are to conduct themselves. We are, after all, created to image Triune God.

Yet even as we consider the dynamics of the relation between the three Persons of the holy Trinity as summarized above, we need to note that these descriptions of their chemistry occur in contexts of the actions of Triune God in relation to mankind. The Father *"sent"* the Son for the benefit of mankind, the Son *"does the will"* of the Father for the benefit of mankind, and the Son *"poured out"* the Spirit for the benefit of mankind. God has not revealed to us the depths of God's identity and characteristics by describing for us the eternal and divine dynamics between the three Persons of the Godhead; He has instead revealed to us the depths of what He is like through the way He relates to people. Any attempt to describe the dynamics of the relation between the three Persons of the Trinity in isolation from people is little more

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than speculation, simply because the Bible does not speak to people about God in any other way. So when Paul speaks about the relation between husband and wife, he does not ask us to consider the relation between the Persons of the Godhead, but he holds before us instead the relation between God and His people. In a fallen world, the relation between God and man is described as between "*Christ and the Church.*"

God's Relation with Man

As one follows the actions of God after He created man in the Garden of Eden, one can understand why Paul brings up the relation between Christ and the Church as a template for marital relations. It's clear from the actions of God immediately after He created the man that He did not intend to retreat into the isolation of heaven to be by Himself, nor did He intend for the man to live on earth in isolation by himself. Instead, God immediately established a relation of love with Adam, and demonstrated that love by putting him in a Garden of plenty (Genesis 2:8,9). Though God certainly cared also for the animals He created, the Scripture does not speak of His putting the animals in such a Garden or enabling the animals to image Him; these things were unique to His relation with man. In the uniqueness of that relationship, God also gave the man a mandate as well as the freedom to eat from every tree except that one, on penalty of death. These actions and instructions on God's part in His relation with the man reveal something of God's love and kindness and care, characteristics that come out not in isolation but in relationships.

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The man was to image what God was like. But man was alone, an individual; Adam was not able to relate to the animals around him in a way that reflected accurately God's way of relating to him. This aloneness, God observed, was "*not good,*" for imaging what God is like involves relations. God, after all, reveals what He is like through the covenant relation He established with man. Imaging God's righteousness and kindness and holiness, etc, occurs primarily through the dynamics of an active relationship.

So God created a woman to be with the man. These two people, male and female, both had the mandate and the ability to reflect what God was like. Yet they did not image God's characteristics simply in isolation from each

other, but they reflected God's love and faithfulness and kindness, etc, in the love and faithfulness and kindness, etc, they showed to each other. Perfectly united as they were into "*one flesh*" (Genesis 2:24), Adam and Eve reflected accurately in their marriage God's relation with mankind.

Here is the background of the "*profound mystery*" the apostle spoke about in Ephesians 5. As image of God, man is to image what God is like – and God is never presented in Scripture in isolation from His people. His relation with His own is the template Adam and Eve were to reflect in their blessed relationship together, to God's greater glory.

**ADAM AND EVE REFLECTED ACCURATELY IN THEIR
MARRIAGE GOD'S RELATION WITH MANKIND.**

After the Fall

The fall into sin changed things radically. In Paradise the relation between mankind and God had been one of ready obedience and thankful trust; mankind (in Adam and Eve) had been subject to God and entrusted themselves to His care. This obedience to God and submission to Him was in turn reflected in Adam's and Eve's relation together, for example, in Eve submitting to her marital head.

In the fall, though, Eve did not seek the leadership of her head-by-marriage. She went her own way, and therein did not follow the instruction of her divine Head. Equally, Adam did not give leadership in his marriage, and so disobeyed his divine Head. Through their disobedience they failed to reflect that God's headship over them was perfect, His commands to them were good, and His care filled with love and kindness. Through their disobedience they instead communicated that's God's commands were wrong, His care deceptive, His love and kindness only a pretense. Their failure to reflect accurately what God was like was not limited to their persons-in-isolation-from-each other, but became evident specifically in the dynamics of their relation together. When God asked Adam whether he had eaten of the forbidden tree, he promptly pointed an accusing finger at his wife – an action he had never done in Paradise and indeed could not do as long as he imaged the relation between God and His people.

From now on no human marriage would reflect the relation God established between Himself and mankind, for no man or woman was "*righteous, not even one.... All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one*" (Romans 3:10,12). All became "*dead in ... transgressions and sins*" and so "*followed the ways of this*

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world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air" – Satan. As the human race reflected something of what Satan is like, we gave ourselves to *"gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts"* (Ephesians 2:1-3). How radically have we fallen, and how terribly was marriage warped!

Redemption

The marvel of the gospel of redemption is that God did not give up on His relation with fallen mankind. Though the human race had offended God greatly, He nevertheless continued His bond of love with man and sent His Son to pay for the sins of the lost. In so doing God has revealed more of what He is like. Whereas in Paradise God had displayed His love and His kindness and His faithfulness by establishing a relationship with a finite creature, after the fall the glorious colors of God's identity became more evident inasmuch as He established a relationship now with fallen, sinful creatures. How delightful such love is, and how profound such kindness! Paul captures this glorious gospel with these words: *"But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace that you have been saved"* (Ephesians 2:4,5). How marvelous this gospel! And what privilege for fallen man to have a relation with such a God, and still be called to image what He is like!

Yet (and this we need to note clearly) God's love as displayed in Jesus Christ is ultimately not directed to every sinner, but only to *"His people"* (Matthew 1:21), those of the human race the Father has given to the Son. Whereas in the beginning there was a relation of love between God and the entire human race, after the fall into sin God's relation of love was through Jesus Christ and was directed to His church. This, however, was not fully evident to anyone walking through the bush of the Old Testament. With the victory of Jesus Christ on the cross, the Son has risen so that the vegetation of the forest has now become obvious. God has a relation with mankind because of the triumphant work of Jesus Christ. But His relation with people is characterized by love only for the church Christ bought through His blood; the rest of mankind lies ultimately under His curse. That is why Paul, when he writes in Ephesians 5 about *"the profound mystery,"* speaks not about 'God and His people' (as was fitting language to describe God's relation with mankind in Paradise), but now speaks about *"Christ and the church."* This choice of words takes into account the reality of the fall into sin and God's redeeming grace in Jesus Christ.

Privilege

Is a sinful couple able to reflect the relation between Christ and the church? Because of our depravity, the answer would have to be No. Yet, in the delightful providence of God, the Christ who came to pay for sin has poured

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out His Holy Spirit to renew the hearts of sinners so that they are dead in sin no longer, are instead raised to new life and so made able to love. The responsibility that comes with this wonderful reality, writes Paul, is that you *"put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness"* (Ephesians 4:22-24). The consequence of putting on a new self, one created to be like God, is this: *"be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God"* (Ephesians 5:1,2).

The instruction to *"be imitators of God"* harks back to the instruction of Genesis 1 to image God. In other words, the privileged position God once gave to the human race (to reflect to the rest of creation what God is like) has been restored; by the grace of God we are allowed and enabled in our conduct to reflect again God's love and His faithfulness and His mercy and so much more! What delightful mercy on God's part! *"What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than God¹⁴ and crowned him with glory and honor"* (Psalm 8:4,5); on a scale of 1 to 10, God gave man the position of a 9! What a God this is!!

Practically

Yet how, concretely, does one imitate God? What does imaging God look like in the lives of regenerated sinners? Paul draws our attention to Jesus Christ, to how He *"loved us and gave Himself up for us"* – an obvious reference to His work on the cross. Jesus Christ on the cross did not consider what was good or easy or preferable for Himself, but He laid down His life for the benefit of the other – and that other is not all men but His church. Such self-emptying was *"a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God"* (Ephesians 5:2), pleasing to Him.

All of this forms the background to what the apostle writes about the relation between man and wife. Time and again in Ephesians 5:22-33 (quoted at the head of this chapter) Paul uses the little word 'as'.

- Vs 22: *"Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord."*
- Vs 23: *"The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church."*
- Vs 24: *"Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything."*
- Vs 25: *"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church."*
- Vs 29: *"No one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church."*

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The point is clear: Paul would have husbands and wives model the dynamics of their marriage relation on the relation between Christ and the church. In their relation together, husband and wife are to image God's relation with His people, a relation that manifests itself in this fallen world specifically through Christ's work on the cross for His church and hence in the church's grateful submission to the self-emptying leadership of her Savior.

**THE PRIMARY RECIPIENT OF ONE'S SPIRIT-INDUCED LOVE,
FAITHFULNESS, MERCY, HOLINESS, RIGHTEOUSNESS,
KINDNESS, ETC, IS, OBVIOUSLY, THE PERSON
CLOSEST TO YOU, AND THAT'S THE SPOUSE.**

This ideal is high, very high. But this is the glorious position given to man! Such is the boundless mercy of the God against whom we sinned that He equips us to carry out the challenge of that position! Through the renewing work of the Holy Spirit sinners once dead in sin are made alive, and as persons alive they are made able to reflect again what God is like. As God loves the undeserving, so the regenerated child of God can love the undeserving. As God is kind and gentle, so the regenerated child of God can be kind and gentle again. As the Lord God is righteous and tolerates no sin, so the sanctified child of God is displeased with sin in his heart and in his home and strives to give it no place. As God is faithful and holy and forgiving, so the sanctified sinner in whom the Spirit dwells is faithful and holy and forgiving. No, the child of God is not made perfect. *"In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience"* (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 44.114). But the *"small beginning"* does not take away from the fact that *"with earnest purpose they do begin to live not only according to some but to all the commandments of God"* and so *"never stop striving to be renewed more and more after God's image"* (Lord's Day 44.114,115).

The primary recipient of one's Spirit-induced love, faithfulness, mercy, holiness, righteousness, kindness, etc, is, obviously, the person closest to you, and that's the spouse. In good days and bad, in riches and poverty, in health and sickness, this is the person you promise never to forsake. It is one thing to love this person, and be kind and merciful, when she (or he) loves you and is kind and merciful to you. It is a different thing to love this person and to be kind and merciful when he (or she) is short-tempered from exhaustion, or frustrated with work, or has betrayed you. It is one thing to tolerate no sin in the house when your spouse has equal values and is equally insistent with you in tolerating no evil. It is a different thing when your spouse has different values.

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When the brokenness of this life is so painfully obvious, it is much harder to imitate God, to love as He has loved sinners, to be kind as He is kind to the undeserving, to hate sin as He hates sin. Yet this is the noble calling of every Christian, and the noble calling specifically of husband and wife in the dynamics of their relationship together. In the strength of the Lord they are made able to reflect something of Christ's relation with His church, and of the way Christ through the Spirit has made the church relate to Him. So the light of the gospel brings into stark relief the wonderful privilege granted to husband and wife in holy marriage; the profound mystery is illuminated.

With all of this in mind, the Form now turns its attention to the application of this passage in the respective roles of husband and wife. In chapter 7 we consider the place of the husband in marriage, and in chapter 8 we turn to the place of the wife. As we work our way through Scripture's instruction on the role of man and woman, we'll find ourselves returning time and again to the apostle's instruction about the "*profound mystery*".

Points for Discussion:

1. Discuss what Paul meant with the term 'mystery'. Why does he use the term 'mystery' when he compares the marital relation with "Christ and the church"? Why does he not instruct husband and wife to reflect the relations between the three Persons of the Trinity?
2. Earlier chapters gave opportunity to reflect on what is meant by the phrase 'image of God'. Did your understanding of the phrase agree with the material of this chapter? If it differed, in what way did it do so? It may be helpful to study Article 14 of the Belgic Confession on this subject.
3. If our exalted position is to image God, who are we to image God to? Who was to observe Adam? Who was to observe Eve? Who was to observe Paul? (see 1 Corinthians 4:9). Who shall observe you and me? What does this mean for evangelism?
4. To follow on from the above question: how do the children in your home learn what God is actually like? What impression do you think they receive from you? From your spouse? From the relation in your marriage? What can you do to help your children understand better what God is like?
5. To be created to image holy God is an inexpressible privilege. To be redeemed and renewed to image this God is a greater privilege still. Is David's amazement at the honor of this privilege (see Psalm 8) also yours? What can be done to make us more aware of our privileged place in God's world?

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6. To husbands: how does awareness of the responsibility of reflecting in your marriage the relation between Christ and His church affect your conduct to your wife?
7. To wives: how does awareness of the responsibility of reflecting in your marriage the relation between Christ and His church affect your conduct to your husband?

¹³ See Article 9 of the *Belgic Confession*.

¹⁴ As the Hebrew actually has it, contrary to the NIV and consistent with most other faithful translations.

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The Role of the Husband in Marriage

As the Form draws out the significance of the profound mystery concerning Christ and the church, it describes the role of the husband in marriage with these words:

The Profound Mystery

"As Christ is the Head of the Church, so the husband is the head of the wife. Christ loved His Church to the end, and gave Himself up for her, that she might be holy and without blemish; likewise the husband shall love his wife as his own body, take care of her, and cherish her."

The Duties of Marriage

"Bridegroom, know that God has set you to be the head of your wife. You shall love her as your own body, as Christ loved His Church and gave Himself up for her. Guide, protect, and comfort your wife. Live with her wisely and honor her, because she is an heir to eternal life together with you; then your prayers will not be hindered. Work faithfully in your daily calling, that you may support your family and also help those in need."

The Marriage Vows

The bridegroom gives a positive answer to this question: *"Do you promise to love and guide her faithfully, to maintain her, and to live with her in holiness, according to the holy Gospel?"*

The emphasis in the Form on the husband's headship over his wife in marriage is out of step with today's western thinking. To appreciate the force

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of these quotes, then, we shall need to listen first to God's revelation of the role He gave to Adam in the beginning. We shall need to come to grips with the effects of the fall into sin on marriage, as well as understand what Christ has done to restore marriage.

Respective Roles

As mentioned repeatedly on earlier pages, both genders of the human race were created to image God, and both were created to rule over the other creatures. On this point the man and the woman have an equal position before God.

**MAN AND WOMAN ARE EQUALLY CREATED TO
IMAGE GOD, EQUALLY SINFUL, EQUALLY
REDEEMED, AND EQUALLY HEIRS OF LIFE ETERNAL.**

Similarly, the fall into sin touched both the man and the woman equally, so that both suffered the consequences of the fall (Gen 3:16-24). Again, in the Old Testament the gospel of redemption pertained to the man as much as it did to the woman (cf Leviticus 1-4). Jesus Christ proclaimed the gospel of forgiveness to men and women alike, and Paul could write pointedly that *"there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"* and together *"heirs according to the promise"* (Galatians 3:28,29). Man and woman are equally created to image God, equally sinful, equally redeemed, and equally heirs of life eternal.

Inequality in Paradise

Equality of position before God, however, does not mean that the man and the woman received from God an identical function in relation to each other. In His wisdom, the Lord God at creation arranged a hierarchy between the man and the woman wherein the one was appointed as leader over the other. It was the man –and not the woman– who received from God the mandate to work the garden and take care of it (Genesis 2:15). To carry out his task in the Garden, the Lord made for the man *"a helper suitable to him"* (Genesis 2:18). Responsibility for the work in the Garden fell, then, to the man; the man received from God the position of headship and leadership, while the woman received from the Creator the function to help. The apostle Paul worded this relationship between the man and woman of Paradise like this: *"Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God"* (1 Corinthians 11:3). And later: *"man did*

not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man" (1 Corinthians 11:8,9). This matter has already received attention in chapter 3.

This reality is significant in relation to marriage as *"a profound mystery ... about Christ and the church"* (Ephesians 5:32). As Paul explained, *"the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church"* (Ephesians 5:23). Or, to describe it in terms consistent with the reality before the fall into sin: as God was the head and leader in His covenant relation with mankind, so Adam was head and leader in his marital relation with Eve.

Role Reversal

The fall into sin damaged much. For reasons we shall never understand, the fall itself happened through a role reversal of man and woman. The devil, we recall, approached the man indirectly, that is, through his helper, and challenged *her* to eat of the forbidden tree. Scripture relates what happened next: *"when the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it"* (Genesis 3:6). When she was challenged to defy God, the woman at a minimum *ought* to have sought leadership from the man God set over her, but she did not. Unilaterally she made a decision; *"she took some and ate it."* Again, when he saw his helper transgressing unilaterally the man at a minimum *ought* to have forbidden her, but he did not. Though he *"was with her"* he let her eat – and so reneged on his responsibility as leader. In fact, *"he ate"* also, and so failed the more in his task as leader.

The Lord God after the fall confronted the human race with their transgression. Scripture's formulation is striking: *"the LORD God called to the man, 'Where are you?'"* (Genesis 3:9). God did not call to the woman, nor did He call to the man and the woman, but He summoned *"the man"*. Herein God showed that He –despite the fall– continued to uphold the ordinance He established in Paradise, namely, that the man is the leader and hence carries the responsibility, and the woman is his helper. That's why Paul can write that *"sin entered the world through one man"* (Romans 5:12) – not through 'one woman' or through 'two people, a man and a woman'. Later Paul mentions the transgressor by name, and does not mention Eve but Adam (Romans 5:14). In another place Paul can write, *"as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive"* (1 Corinthians 15:22). Though Eve was the initial transgressor (as Paul well knows, see 1 Timothy 2:14), the responsibility for the fall belongs with Adam since he received from God the position of leadership and authority.

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Penalty

It's this same perspective that makes God's penalty on the man and the woman so striking, as recorded in Genesis 3:15-19. Consider the following points.

1. In the hearing of the man and his wife, God announced to the serpent that God would *"put enmity between you and the woman"* (Genesis 3:15). The warfare would not be between the serpent and the man, but between the serpent and the woman. Not the offspring of the man would crush the serpent, but the offspring of the woman. Make no mistake: God was as mighty to bring His Son into the world through a man as through a woman. But in declaring an antithesis between the serpent and *"the woman"*, and adding that the ultimate victory over sin and Satan would occur through the seed of the woman, God deliberately passed the man by – and here was an implicit judgment on his failure to give the required leadership in the face of Satan's temptation.
2. After His address to the serpent, the Lord God turned to speak to the woman. *"To the woman He said, 'I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you'"* (Genesis 3:16). To be clear: the curse here is not in the role of motherhood, for receiving children was part of God's ordinance on the day God created man and woman (Genesis 1:27,28). The curse here lies in the pain that will characterize pregnancy, birth and child rearing.

Of greater interest to our topic, however, is God's closing words to the woman: *"Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you"* (Genesis 3:16b). The reference to 'desire' has led some readers to think that God speaks of the woman's sexual appetite for her husband. That is incorrect. Neither before nor after the fall into sin is there anything wrong with sexual desire; this desire is not a curse. The point is what one does with that desire, and that's a topic to which we need to return in a later chapter.

Others have wondered how to understand the word 'will' in the closing words of this text. Does the word 'will' reflect a command: the man will (=must) rule over the woman? Or does the word 'will' reflect a prophecy: in the brokenness of a fallen world, the man will (though he ought not to) rule over the woman? If it is the latter, it's said, redemption in Christ will mean that the Christian husband will resist any temptation to 'rule over' his wife, and the Christian woman will not quietly accept the man's domination.

The significance of these words becomes evident when we lay them beside God's words to Cain one chapter later. When Cain was angry be-

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cause God did not look with favour on his offering, the Lord addressed Cain about the sin that was crouching at his door: *"it [sin] desires to have you, but you must master it"* (Genesis 4:7b). The Hebrew of these two sentences (3:16b and 4:7b) is exactly the same, except for appropriate changes in person and gender. The significance of God's words to Cain is clear: Sin desires to have you, to control you, but you must not let it happen; you must rule over sin. That is: because of sin's desire, Cain has an obligation to resist sin and to rule over sin.

THE WOMAN DESIRES TO CONTROL HER HUSBAND, BUT THE HUSBAND IS NOT TO LET IT HAPPEN

This clarifies God's words to the woman. The woman desires to control her husband,¹⁵ but the husband is not to let it happen; he must rule over the woman – according to the position God had given in Paradise. God's penalty on the fallen human race is that the role reversal that characterized the fall itself would trouble human life in the course of history; the woman would continue to seek to dominate, but the man must continue to resist her effort and be the leader. Because of his depravity, however, the man's leadership too often comes across as either weak or tyrannical – both of which in turn fills the woman with increased resentment against the man and more attempt to usurp his leadership. This struggle between the man and the woman has been the driving force of so much sorrow in the course of human history. Only through the renewing work of the Holy Spirit is the man made able to give good leadership to his wife, and so rule her in a God-pleasing fashion. Similarly, only through the renewing work of the Spirit is the woman made able to resist the urge to dominate her husband and accept his leadership.

3. After speaking to the woman, the Lord addressed the man. *"To Adam he said, 'Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree..., cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life... until you return to the ground"* (Genesis 3:17-19). Notice: God faults Adam with two transgressions here. The second transgression is the one we typically think of when we recall the fall into sin, namely, Adam's eating from the forbidden tree. The one God mentions first, however, is Adam's failure to act according to the leadership role God had assigned in relation to his wife; God faults him for listening to his wife. That God mentions this failure at all, let alone mentions it first, points up how much God insists that the *man* is the

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leader and so is ultimately responsible for the fall into sin. Similarly, the curse that God pronounces on the ground is *"because of you"*, and in the Hebrew the 'you' distinctly refers to Adam alone and not to his wife; *he* is responsible for the sweat and tears that shall characterize all human labor. Again, it's Adam, not Eve, who is told that *"you [will] return to the ground,"* that is, will die. Certainly, she will die too, of course, for as goes the head so goes the member, but the onus lies here on the man and his responsibility. He first of all must bear the penalty for his disobedience to God's ordinance of being the leader to his wife.

Conclusion: in the way God responds to their fall, it is clear that God maintains the hierarchy He established in the beginning. The man is the leader and ultimately responsible; the buck stops with him.

After Paradise

In the years of human history after the fall into sin, the Lord God has steadfastly maintained the ordinance of the beginning, namely, the man is the head and the woman is not. Consider the following sample of Biblical data:

- Only masculine names are found in the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 10. Obviously, women were involved in bringing forth the next generation, but the Holy Spirit does not mention them because the man is the leader – and to mention the leader is to mention at the same time those over whom he is responsible.
- God did not command the woman Sarai to come out of Ur, but the man Abram (Genesis 12:1). Had God so wished, He could have addressed His command to Sarai, so that *she* take the initiative to lead her household (including Abram) out of Ur. That God addressed Abram was deliberate, and in full accord with His principle of male headship as expressed in Genesis 2.
- The sign God ordained for the covenant (circumcision) was to be given to the boys alone (Genesis 17:10,11). Yet the girls were very much included in God's covenant people, for men and women, older and younger alike, were assembled at Mt Sinai when God gave them the Ten Words of His covenant (Exodus 19,20). Had God wished to give girls a separate sign, He was mighty to do so.
- Amongst His people Israel God appointed only men to the priesthood and to be elders (Exodus 28:1; Exodus 18:21,25). God was sovereign and therefore free to appoint to positions of leadership persons of either gender. His decision to appoint only men to positions of leadership flowed from the respective positions He gave to man and woman in the beginning.
- Only the males in Israel were commanded to appear before the Lord, and not the females (Exodus 23:17; Deuteronomy 16:16). This does not

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exclude the females, but does spell out the man's and the woman's respective positions.

- The formulation of God's directive about the jealous husband is instructive. *"Then the priest shall put the woman under oath and say to her, 'If no other man has slept with you and you have not gone astray and become impure while married to your husband, may this bitter water that brings a curse not harm you'"* (Numbers 5:19). Here the NIV does not render the Hebrew accurately, for (as most other translations also have it) the Hebrew does not speak of being 'married to your husband' but of being *"under your husband's authority."* It's a formulation fully in line with the lessons of Genesis 2.
- When the Lord God spoke of Israelites in general, whether male or female, He consistently used the pronoun 'he' (see, for example, Leviticus 1:3). This was not discrimination against the female, nor was this a culturally conditioned manner of speaking, but it was a formulation that flowed directly from the structure God ordained in the beginning. In the eyes of the Creator, the masculine pronoun does not exclude women, but gives recognition to the fact that woman is part of man and therefore the masculine pronoun can stand for all people. Inasmuch as God's view on things remains the true measure of reality, today's people do well to recognize that intermingling the pronouns 'he' and 'she', or even using the phrase 'he/she', does injustice to God's ordinance. Similarly, a gender-neutral translation of the Bible does not do justice to God's revelation.

These and so many more examples point up that the norm God ordained in the beginning remains the standard for the human race, namely, that the man is the head and the woman is his helper. Though both man and woman are equal before God, their functions in life are different. 'Leadership' characterizes the man; 'helping' characterizes the woman.

Cultural?

It has been said that the relative position of the man and the woman as reflected in texts as those mentioned above reflect the cultural expectations of the time. In other words, God worked with and bound himself to the cultural realities of the times. So (it is said) God also today works with cultural realities of our time (which happens to be egalitarianism), and so we would do wrong to insist that God's choosing only men to the priesthood of Israel means that only men may serve in the offices today.

In reply, we need to remember that the world's Creator is and remains sovereign over all that happens in human history, including the shape of a peo-

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ple's culture and what God thinks of that culture. The culture of Israel's time did not dictate God's decision as to whether to address Abram or Sarai when He called the family from Ur, or whether to appoint men to the priesthood or women; rather, the culture of Israel and the relative position God gave to the man and to the woman was built on God's revelation in Genesis 2. It is telling that the Lord emphatically *opposed* particular cultural realities when His people settled in the Promised Land; they were forbidden, for example, to embrace the homosexual behavior found among the locals of Canaan because such behavior was contrary to God's ordinance of Genesis 2 (see Genesis 19:1-29; Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Deuteronomy 23:17,18; Judges 19:22-30). There is simply no Scriptural justification for assuming that God –and hence the values of His church– is bound by a people's culture.

**THE WORLD'S CREATOR IS AND REMAINS SOVEREIGN
OVER ALL THAT HAPPENS IN HUMAN HISTORY,
INCLUDING THE SHAPE OF A PEOPLE'S CULTURE AND
WHAT GOD THINKS OF THAT CULTURE.**

Later Scripture

The New Testament maintains the inter-personal relation between man and woman as ordained in Genesis 2. Consider the following data:

- The Savior God sent into the world came as a man and not as a woman (Matthew 1:25; Revelation 12:5). God, we need to know, was mighty to crush Satan through the sacrifice of woman, but He chose to do it through the sacrifice of a man.
- Jesus chose men to be His disciples and not women (Mark 3:16-18). If Jesus Christ wanted women among His disciples He would have called women to that role, and (if necessary) made it culturally acceptable too.
- In Acts 1:16 we read of Peter speaking to the disciples, a body of 120 persons including both men and women. He addressed his speech to "*men and brethren*," as the Greek has it. Though Peter's words were no doubt intended for all 120 disciples, regardless of gender, Peter reflects the principle of Genesis 2 by addressing the meeting with reference to the male portion of the audience, the leaders.
- In 1 Corinthians 11:3 the apostle writes, "*Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.*" Paul can write this only because the structure of Genesis 2 –whereby the man is the head of the woman– remains valid despite the passage of time and the progress in salvation history.

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- When Paul lays out the requirements for those who can serve in the offices of the church, he not only stipulates the gender of the candidate – *“the husband of but one wife”* – but also that *“he must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect”* (1 Timothy 3:2,4; see also 12). The later requirement describes the man as leader and ruler of his family, even as God intended Adam to be in Paradise.
- By Paul’s instruction, the women of the congregation are *“to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God”* (Titus 2:5). It is striking that the wife receives the instruction to be subject to the husband (and not the other way around), and that disobedience on this point results in others speaking ill of God’s word. This is because this order of things is the pattern God has established from the beginning.

These data, and so many more, make clear that the principle of male headship as marked out in God’s revelation in Paradise and in God’s approach to the human race after their fall into sin remains the norm of God throughout the ages.

Only in Marriage?

A question arises. Was it God’s intent that this hierarchy be true for marriage alone? Is the man to fill the role of leader only in marriage, but not in the world of business, education, politics, etc?

The division of life into various realms is ultimately a manmade division, not reflected in Scripture. When the Lord God put the man in the Garden with the mandate to *“work it and care for it”* (Genesis 2:15), Adam was made the leader of every aspect of his existence. When God in His wisdom added a wife to his life, Adam’s mandate to give leadership was not limited to their moments at home but also to their time working in the Garden. Eve’s conversation with the devil and Adam’s negligence in giving leadership was in that instance obviously not limited to marital matters, but extended also to matters of life and death, of economics and business, politics and education and the judiciary, etc. All of life is of one piece, and Adam’s failure in relation to his wife in Genesis 3 affected every area of life dramatically.

When the Lord God, therefore, appointed men to the offices of elder and priest in Israel, and when Jesus Christ appointed men to the office of apostle and Paul intimated that elders and deacons should be men, the application of male headship is thereby not limited to church – to the exclusion of life outside home and church. The ordinance of God concerning male headship is valid for every aspect of life; by His sovereign decree the man is the leader. That the Bible knows of exceptions as Deborah (Judges 4) does not undo the fact that the woman was not created for the role of leadership (as also Deborah’s words to Barak in Judges 4:9 show).

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That the man is the leader and the woman is not does not go down well with fallen mankind – as God Himself decreed in the penalty He laid upon the fallen human race in Genesis 3:16. But those who take seriously God's ordinance in creation, as well as His punishment upon sin, will embrace God's Word in humility. They appreciate God's explanation for the battle of the sexes, they delight in His forgiving grace in Jesus Christ, and they thank Him for His renewing work in the Holy Spirit.

For indeed, the renewing work of the Holy Spirit is wonderful, also when it comes to man's headship. That becomes evident when we consider what headship concretely looks like.

What Headship looks like

Headship in first instance involves authority, government, leadership. That is evident from the way the word 'head' is repeatedly used in Scripture. To mention but one telling example: after His triumph on the cross, God *"raised [Christ] from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given.... And God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the church..."* (Ephesians 1:20-22; cf Colossians 2:10). The reference to headship is here clearly a reference to Christ's authority over all creation. In fact, by exalting Jesus Christ to be ruler over all, the Lord God fulfilled the intent of Genesis 1:26, when God announced that the man He would create to image Him would *"rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth...."*

Christ

What does Christ's government look like? Does He as head rule tyrannically? Is He callous to the needs of His subjects? In the battles of the great antithesis, Christ as King –even as God the Father– has no love for those who side with the devil. Though the Lord shows much kindness and patience today (Romans 2:4), His judgment on the ungodly shall be eternal damnation. That is His righteous and divine prerogative as Creator of all.

As head over all, however, Christ's government over the world is directed to the benefit of His church. That's the force of the closing words of the above quote from Ephesians 1: Christ is *"head over everything for the church."* The church is His bride, for whom this Bridegroom's conduct forms the template for every Christian bridegroom. Says Paul in the same letter in which he wrote about Christ's headship over the world: *"the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, His body, of which He is the Savior"* (Ephesians 5:23).

That Christ is the Savior of the Church is a reference to His work on Cal-

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vary. Jesus Christ had been with God in heavenly glory from eternity, yet emptied Himself of His Godhead in order to join a fallen human race. So completely did He become one of us that He became mortal, sickly (Isaiah 53:4), vulnerable. He *"made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.... He humbled Himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross"* (Philippians 2:7,8). What was the purpose of His total Self-emptying? Paul explains: *"Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to Himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless"* (Ephesians 5:25-27). Here is fully illustrated what Jesus said to His disciples: *"the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many"* (Matthew 20:28). It's what Jesus began to do when He took a towel and a washbasin, and washed His disciples' feet; on the cross *"He ... showed them the full extent of His love"* (John 13:1).

CHRIST'S CONDUCT FORMS THE TEMPLATE FOR EVERY CHRISTIAN BRIDEGROOM.

This love of Christ as Head is not limited to His becoming man and His sacrifice on the cross. He has since ascended into heaven to receive that glorious throne at God's right hand, as Head over all. For the benefit of His Bride the ascended Christ continued to serve her, for He sent His Holy Spirit to earth to dwell in His people – and the blessed result is that His people are changed from persons who serve the self into persons who serve the other. Fallen mankind had *"lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more"* (Ephesians 4:19), and that's a reference not just to sexuality but to every form of selfishness and hence of wanting selfish control over the spouse. But with the coming of the Holy Spirit, the child of God is renewed so that you *"put off your old self"* and are *"made new in the attitude of your minds"*, so that the Christian *"put[s] on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness"* (Ephesians 4:22-24). This new self does not *"gratify the desires of the sinful nature"* but brings forth *"the fruit of the Spirit"* (Galatians 5:16,22). The acts of the sinful nature (*"sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like"*, Galatians 5:19-21) have a common denominator: selfishness. The fruits of the Spirit (*"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control"*, Galatians 5:22,23) also have a common denominator: service

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to the other. Such is the care of the exalted Christ that He has poured out His Holy Spirit so that His people might reflect the same self-emptying conduct that Christ exhibited for His Bride.

This work of Jesus Christ was a richer display of God's love than the love God displayed for the creature man in Paradise. That God in the beginning established a covenant relation with man-made-of-dust was distinctly mercy and love, and this act on His part definitely portrayed something of what He was like. But the depth of His love and mercy, not to mention hatred for sin, came into much sharper focus in the work of Jesus Christ. For He laid down His life for sinners!

Husbands in Ephesians

Through the blessing of the Lord, regenerated husbands are made able to *"love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her"* (Ephesians 5:25). Instead of insisting that the wife submit to every unfeeling demand of the husband (sinful as he is), the husband—precisely in his office as head—receives from God the mandate and the strength to demonstrate in deeds what leadership really is: self-emptying service. To change the analogy for a moment: as the head of the body ensures that the arms and legs and fingers and toes belonging to the body are sufficiently protected from dangers of frostbite or infection or broken bones, so the head of the wife ensures that the wife is protected, indeed, is made to flourish. That's the example of Jesus Christ as Head, an example every husband is privileged to imitate.

What does this kind of self-denial and service to the wife look like for the husband? Paul in Ephesians 5 says that Christ *"gave Himself up for [the church] to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to Himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless"* (vss 25-27). Then Paul adds this telling instruction, *"In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies"* (vs 28). Those words describe the goal of the husband's service to his wife; his self-denial must seek to make her flourish. Instead of her looking tired and worn out on account of his demands and the trials of life (including the demands of motherhood), she should, through his care, look happy, glowing, vibrant, thankful. Paul adds, *"He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church"* (vss 28,29). The wife is the husband's own body, for the two (said God in Genesis 2:24) are *"one flesh"*. The husband, then, is to feed and care for his wife as he would look after himself. All her needs (whether physical, spiritual, emotional, psychological, etc) are his to supply, just as Christ from His place in heaven continues to supply all His Bride's needs until she is ready for the coming of the Bridegroom on the Last Day.

Husbands in Peter

The apostle Peter adds some further detail about the task of the husband in relation to his wife. He told the wives to “*be submissive to your husbands*” (1 Peter 3:1), and so implied the husband’s position as head and leader. He then adds, “*Husbands, ... 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*” (1 Peter 3:7). The phrase translated as “be considerate” catches in Greek the notion of knowing the wife very well, and then treating her in accordance with her needs. Implicit here is the matter of conversation and openness, and then taking seriously what is going on in her life, her body, her mood, etc. From the husband’s position of knowledge about her needs, he is to “*live with*” his wife – and yet do more than inhabit the same house as she does; he is to supply all her needs.

**THE HUSBAND IS TO RESPECT THE WAY GOD HAS MADE
THE WOMAN, AND SO TREAT HER WITH CARE, AS FRAGILE.**

Again, the husband is to take seriously the fact that in God’s wise providence the wife is “*the weaker partner*.” The word ‘partner’ is literally ‘vessel’, as a clay pot. All people are ‘vessels’, made of clay and will one day return to dust; the human race is finite, weak. Yet it has pleased the Lord to create the woman the weaker of the two genders. The reference may be to physical strength or the need for a shoulder or the ravages of the monthly cycle, or any combination of these and other factors. The husband is to respect the way God has made the woman, and so treat her with care, as fragile. She is, after all, an heir to eternal life just as much as the husband, and that’s to say that both have been saved by grace, both belong to God, and both look forward to something better than the broken lives they now have.

For this reason the husband is also to pray with his wife, and lay her needs (and therefore his needs as her head and leader) before the Lord. Yet to pray together takes conversation about the day’s events, and instruction from the Lord over an open Bible. It is the husband’s privilege as head of his wife to see to it that the Bible is opened daily, and husband and wife speak together about the questions and challenges of daily living in light of Scripture, and then lay their joys and concerns together before the Lord of life.

What, then, does the husband’s headship look like? In a word, headship involves *service*. Biblical headship leaves no place for selfishness on the husband’s part, no place for his commanding her to supply his coffee and clean

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up his dishes, no place for the husband demanding his wife because he has an appetite for her body. In denial of self –remember Jesus Christ!– the husband needs to pursue with strong leadership whatever makes his wife flourish in the Lord's service. That is the privileged place God has given him, and to this responsibility the Lord will hold him accountable.

Blessed is the man who has learned to love in the Scriptural sense of the word, and so to lead his wife well. And blessed is the woman who receives such a husband! Such a man reflects something of God's love for His people in Jesus Christ, and so does justice to marriage as *"a profound mystery ... about Christ and the church."*

Breadwinner?

In the relevant quotes from the Marriage Form at the beginning of this chapter there was also an instruction to the husband to *"work faithfully in your daily calling, that you may support your family and also help those in need."* This quote comes from the apostle's words to the Ephesians, *"He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need"* (Ephesians 4:28). This instruction builds on God's command to Adam in Genesis 2 when He put him in the Garden of Eden with the mandate *"to work it and take care of it"* (vs 15). We need not elaborate further, then, about the need to work as God gives strength; it's an obvious Biblical given.

The question arises, though, whether this command makes the husband the sole and responsible breadwinner for the family, so as to supply the family's needs as well as put the family in a position to give to charity. The Form gives this instruction to *him*, and not to the wife. Is that Scriptural? Is not the command of Ephesians 4 directed to the whole congregation of the Ephesians, and not just to the men?

Whether the Form rightly charges the husband with the task of being the family breadwinner is best considered after we have discussed the role of the wife in marriage. For this topic, then, the reader is referred to the closing paragraph of the next chapter.

Points for Discussion:

1. For husbands:
 - a. Discuss what you understand your role as head and leader in your marriage is.
 - b. Detail how you concretely carry out that role.
 - c. Discuss what you think your wife (or fiancée) expects of you in your role as head.

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2. For wives:
 - a. Discuss what you understand your husband's role as head and leader is to be in your marriage.
 - b. Detail how, in your judgment, he concretely carries out that role.
 - c. Discuss what you think your husband's (or fiancé's) understanding of his position might be.
3. Why did God create the man? How did God fill the insufficiency He created in man? What does this say about men being single? What does it say about the way men are to treat women? Is it fitting that men hold the door open for a woman?
4. Put into words how you feel about the equality God has created in men and women in their relation to Him, and the inequality He created in their relation to each other. How well do your feelings conform to God's Word? What can be done to make your feelings agree with God's Word?
5. Is the role of the man as head and leader limited to marriage or does it extend to other parts of life? If so, which? And why? How should this receive public expression?
6. Discuss how Jesus Christ set an example for husbands to follow. What, then, does headship actually look like? Find in the Bible some words that capture the essence of the husband's task as head.
7. What place does your wife have in your career? How does this compare to the Scriptural norm?
8. Is managing the financial affairs of the family strictly the husband's department? Should there be openness between husband and wife on earnings and expenditures, and agreement on what to buy? Explain your answer.
9. In the benediction at the end of the Marriage Form, the officiating minister addresses the newly weds as "Brother and sister _____." In Christian circles the blank contains the surname of the bridegroom. The understanding is that the bride's identity and name is now taken up in her husband's identity and name. Are there Biblical grounds for this practice? Would the Lord have us retain this practice in our changing culture? Why or why not?

¹⁵ The NIV translates too loosely with its rendition: "*your desire will be for your husband*".

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The Role of the Wife in Marriage

The Form for the Solemnization of Marriage looked at the place of the husband in marriage through the lens of what the apostle Paul wrote about the relation between Christ and the church. On the basis of the same passage, the Form next considers the place of the wife. I take the liberty to repeat the relevant passage of Scripture:

"Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, His body, of which He is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to Himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of His body. 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband" (Ephesians 5:22-33).

After referring to this passage, the Form details the role of the wife in marriage like this.

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The Profound Mystery

"As the Church is subject to Christ, so the wife shall be subject in everything to her husband, respect him, and entrust herself to his loving care, following the example of godly women who trusted in God and were subject to their husbands."

The Duties of Marriage

"Bride, you shall love your husband and be subject to him, as the Church is subject to Christ. Accept his guidance and assist him in all good things. Take proper care of your family and household, and live modestly, in faith, love, and holiness."

The Marriage Vows

The Bride gives an affirmative answer to this question: *"Do you promise to love and obey him, to assist him, and to live with him in holiness, according to the holy Gospel?"*

Questions

There are formulations in these statements that raise questions, and perhaps even one's hackles. Is the wife indeed to *"be subject to"* her husband, let alone *"obey"* him?! Is such language not long antiquated, a throwback from a less cultured era? Does the wife not have gifts to stand on her own, and should she not be encouraged to develop her gifts?

IS THE WIFE INDEED TO "BE SUBJECT TO" HER HUSBAND, LET ALONE "OBEY" HIM?!

It ought first to be stated unequivocally that a woman is every bit as gifted and able as a man. The Lord God in no way made the woman to have lesser capacity than the man. Both man and woman were created (and therefore gifted) to image God (Genesis 1:26,27), both equally fell into sin (Genesis 3:6), and both are equally redeemed in Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:28). Both receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:17), and both have their individual natural gifts. That the Form speaks of the woman needing to be subject to the man has nothing to do with the man's greater physical, emotional, mental, spiritual or financial strength (which in each case may or may not be true), but has everything to do with why God created the woman in the first place.

The Wife and the Church

Before we turn to Genesis 2 and the reason why God created a woman, we do well to refresh in our minds why Ephesians 5 spoke as it did about the husband and the wife. God in the beginning created mankind in order that this creature might image what God is like. This was the task not just of the man as an individual or of the woman as an individual, but also the task of the man and the woman in their relationship together. After all, the almighty Creator did not isolate Himself from His creation, but established a bond of love with the creature man. In the dynamics of His relation with man the Lord God revealed what He is like. His love was not a static something caught within the isolation of His being, but His love was expressed in the way in which He cared for mankind. Similarly, His faithfulness and His mercy and His hatred of sin, etc, were not distant realities caught behind the locked doors of His Triune Self. Rather, these divine characteristics came to expression in the way this covenant God lived with people. His care, His visits in the Garden, His conversations with man and so much more demonstrated what God's love and kindness and faithfulness and holiness were all about. And this is what Adam and Eve were to reflect in their relationship together. Adam, as head in his relation with Eve, was to reflect God's headship in His relation with man, and Eve in her approach to Adam was to reflect how mankind could trust God and submit to Him in the full confidence that His care was perfect.

After the fall into sin, God revealed His love and His holiness and His faithfulness, etc, through His Son Jesus Christ. Christ laid down His life for His people, His church. Marriage as it is renewed through the Holy Spirit reflects this relation between Christ and the church – the *"profound mystery"* of Ephesians 5. In this context, Paul says concerning the wife: *"as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything"* (Ephesians 5:24) and *"the wife must respect her husband"* (Ephesians 5:33). To understand Paul's words here, we need to understand why the Lord God made the woman to begin with. That brings us to Genesis 2.

Why a woman?

On the sixth day of creation the Lord God fashioned a man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life (Genesis 2:7). The Lord then put the man He'd created into the Garden He had prepared for him, and gave him the instruction to *"work it and take care of it"* (Genesis 2:15). Yet when the Lord from heaven on high observed the man laboring in the Garden by himself, He concluded that *"it is not good for the man to be alone,"* and so decided to *"make a helper suitable for him"* (Genesis 2:18). He did so by taking a rib from the man, fashioning a woman, and bringing her to the man (Genesis 2:22).

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Notice: God called the woman into existence because of an incompleteness God had placed in the man. He was to image God, and could not fully do that by himself. The woman joined the other creatures on the stage of this world because the man needed someone to relate to, even as God related to man. In another place of Scripture the Holy Spirit states expressly that the woman was created *"for man"* (1 Corinthians 11:9). The woman was not created to be an individual on her own, nor was she created for self-fulfillment, but she was formed to complete the man; he *needs* her. The implication is that she needs him for her sense of fulfillment.

Helper

The woman's role in completing the man is caught in the word *"helper"* (Genesis 2:18). There is a party needing assistance, and there is a second party able to give this assistance. With ears shaped by our culture, we tend to hear in the word 'helper' a nuance of being 'less than', and so we hear something degrading in the term. That's not at all the meaning the Lord God put in the word *"helper"* when He used it in Paradise. In fact, Scriptures repeatedly use the identical word to describe what God is to His people; they need assistance and He is their Helper. There's obviously nothing demeaning in God being man's helper; on the contrary, in His covenant relation with people it is His honor to be man's Helper.

How, specifically, is the woman to carry out her mandate as helper for her husband? God's actions as helper to Israel can give us some broad outline, for He pursued Israel's good and supplied her needs – and the wife as helper is to do the same. Yet we get a far better sense of what the role of the wife as helper to her husband is from the song the Holy Spirit gave us in Proverbs 31.

Proverbs 31

This remarkable passage of Scripture reads as follows:

- ¹⁰ *A wife of noble character who can find?
She is worth far more than rubies.*
- ¹¹ *Her husband has full confidence in her
and lacks nothing of value.*
- ¹² *She brings him good, not harm,
all the days of her life.*
- ¹³ *She selects wool and flax
and works with eager hands.*
- ¹⁴ *She is like the merchant ships,
bringing her food from afar.*
- ¹⁵ *She gets up while it is still dark;*

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- she provides food for her family
and portions for her servant girls.*
- 16 *She considers a field and buys it;
out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.*
- 17 *She sets about her work vigorously;
her arms are strong for her tasks.*
- 18 *She sees that her trading is profitable,
and her lamp does not go out at night.*
- 19 *In her hand she holds the distaff
and grasps the spindle with her fingers.*
- 20 *She opens her arms to the poor
and extends her hands to the needy.*
- 21 *When it snows, she has no fear for her household;
for all of them are clothed in scarlet.*
- 22 *She makes coverings for her bed;
she is clothed in fine linen and purple.*
- 23 *Her husband is respected at the city gate,
where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.*
- 24 *She makes linen garments and sells them,
and supplies the merchants with sashes.*
- 25 *She is clothed with strength and dignity;
she can laugh at the days to come.*
- 26 *She speaks with wisdom,
and faithful instruction is on her tongue.*
- 27 *She watches over the affairs of her household
and does not eat the bread of idleness.*
- 28 *Her children arise and call her blessed;
her husband also, and he praises her:*
- 29 *"Many women do noble things,
but you surpass them all."*
- 30 *Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting;
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.*
- 31 *Give her the reward she has earned,
and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.*

As we read this poem, a sense of failure and inadequacy can wash over us. If this is the standard a "wife of noble character" must meet, no man shall ever find such a wife, and no woman shall ever be such a wife. Observe what this woman does: she gets up while it's still dark, feeds her children and servants, gets involved in real estate and trading, makes clothes for her family, dresses herself in the best, hasn't a care for cold weather or troubled times –

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and all the while her husband is busy with tasks outside the home. She's obviously somewhat of what today is called a feminist, for she goes her own way, and she's a career woman who juggles the responsibility of work and family well. This is clearly a super-woman, with unlimited capacity and energy and resources, the dream woman whom none can match or find.

WHAT DRIVES THIS WOMAN OF "NOBLE CHARACTER" IS NOT A CAREER OR A SENSE OF SATISFACTION APART FROM HER HUSBAND.

Such a reading of this portion of Scripture does injustice to what the passage says. The Holy Spirit describes her in verse 30 as *"a woman who fears the LORD."* Given that she stands in awe of God and so takes the Lord for real, we rightly acknowledge that this woman of Proverbs 31 knows God's revelation about the role of the wife as He revealed it in Genesis 2; she knows she is *"helper"* to her husband. Indeed, so much is she helper to her husband that *"her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value"* (vs 11); more, *"she brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life"* (vs 12). What drives this woman of *"noble character"* is not a career or a sense of satisfaction apart from her husband, but this woman is a child of the Lord who has embraced in faith the reason for her existence, and so uses all her manifold gifts to be helper to her husband – for his benefit. And she's quite successful in achieving this goal.

It should be noted that the poem and the activities of this devout wife reflect the economic and social structures of Israel at the time. Instead of offices and factories as our culture knows (with its work away from home), Israel's culture knew many cottage industries. The husband, then, worked from the home, and so his wife (helper as she was to be in every aspect of his life) helped along in his work. When the woman of Proverbs 31, then, *"works with eager hands"* and *"brings her food from afar"* and *"provides food for her family"* (vss 13-15), we are not to understand her actions as independent from her husband's activities; instead, she is using her gifts to help him in the family business, be it that she focuses on the groceries side of things. *"She considers a field and buys it"* (vs 16), and yet that's not without her husband's involvement but is instead her expression of helper to her husband as befits one who fears the Lord. The result of her diligence in her God-given task is that *"her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land"* (vs 23). Through her faithful help and support, he can extend his energies and influence beyond the boundaries of his property and family into

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the community at large – and that’s all part of taking care of the Garden God has entrusted to man.

This husband, in fact, does not hesitate to praise his wife for what she is for him. “*Many women do noble things,*” he exalts, “*but you surpass them all*” (vs 29). He is eager to speak so positively of his wife, for she, and she alone, is *his* helper. And he benefits greatly from what God his Maker has given to him in her.

To emphasize further this woman’s godliness, I draw attention to the words of the Holy Spirit in vs 10, where she is described as “*worth far more than rubies.*” This formulation concerning her value is striking, because the identical formulation has been used earlier in the book of Proverbs in relation to wisdom. “*Wisdom,*” says Solomon in Proverbs 3:15 and in 8:11 “*is more precious than rubies.*” The woman of Proverbs 31 is “*worth far more than rubies*” precisely because she is wise – and Biblical wisdom involves fearing the Lord, embracing His ordinances. This woman embraced in faith God’s instruction about why He created the woman (herself included) and gives herself wholeheartedly to her God-given task beside the man of God’s choosing. The relation between these two is active and healthy, and its dynamic reflects something of the relation between God in Christ and His people. Her focus is *him*, even as his focus is *her*.

Timothy and Titus

This understanding of what it means to be a helper to one’s husband receives echo in the New Testament. Paul tells Timothy to “*counsel younger widows*” in his congregation “*to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander*” (1 Timothy 5:14). To Titus Paul writes that older women of the congregation are to “*train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God*” (Titus 2:3-5).

Of significance to our topic at this point are the phrases “*to manage their homes*” and “*to be busy at home.*” The context in both passages obviously implies the presence of a husband, a man who has received from God the responsibility to look after his home and family (see Genesis 2:15). Yet now the wife is told to “*manage*” and to “*be busy*” at “*home.*” With these words Paul describes her task as helper beside her husband. As the woman of Proverbs 31 in faith used her energies and imagination to be a very effective helper to her husband, so the women of 1 Timothy 5 and Titus 2 are in faith to use their resources to be helpers for their husbands. They’re not to go off in pursuit of their own careers, nor are they to be busy pursuing their own friends and entertainment, but they need (says the Lord) to be helper beside the husband

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and so devote themselves to the opportunities that come to them in the family home.

It is striking that in both the Timothy and the Titus passages Paul speaks of the outsider's evaluation. When the wife manages the home well (and that's to say that she carries out well her role as helper to her husband) she "*gives the enemy no opportunity for slander*" and "*no one*" has reason to "*malign the word of God.*" That's because the ordinance of God in Genesis 2 is no secret to the human race; those who fear God need to take seriously what He has revealed about the reason why He created the woman in the first place. Those who call themselves Christians and claim to take His Word seriously, but fail to live by the principle of Genesis 2 in their marriage, give occasion for unbelievers to speak evil of God and His Word.

Submission

The woman who accepts in faith the reason for her creation also acknowledges in conduct and in attitude her place under her husband. To Titus Paul wrote that wives were "*to be subject to their husbands*" (Titus 2:5). To the Colossians he wrote, "*Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord*" (3:18). To the Ephesians he gave more detail, "*Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, His body, of which He is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything*" (5:22-24). Peter said it too: "*Wives, ... be submissive to your husbands*" (1 Peter 3:1).

The term translated in these passages as 'subject' or 'submit' is unambiguous in its meaning. A few chapters before Paul gave his instructions to wives to submit to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22-24), he used the identical verb in relation to the exalted Savior: "*God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the church*" (Ephesians 1:22). 'Place ... under' is the same word in Greek as 'submit'. Again, when Paul tells Titus that older women should teach younger women "*to be subject to their husbands*" (Titus 2:5), he repeats the verb four verses later: "*Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything*" (Titus 2:9). The sense of the term is clear; it means 'to subject or subordinate'. Husband and wife are definitely equal before God (Galatians 3:28), but God has arranged a hierarchy between the two whereby the one is the leader and the other submits to the leader. In her helping her husband, the wife takes his wishes into account, accepts them and submits to them. Again, in acknowledging his leadership, the wife accepts her husband's instruction and directives, and submits – and so reflects the attitude God's people are to have to God, and the church is to have to Christ.

This submission, we need to know, does *not* mean that the wife gives

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up all independent thought so as to become her husband's doormat. It is highly significant that every time the Scripture instructs the woman to submit, it does so *before* it addresses the husband as to his responsibility (see Ephesians 5:22-33; Colossians 3:18,19; 1 Peter 3:1-7). That's because the Lord God keeps on addressing the woman on her responsibility before God, and gives her space to act in faith. Only in second place is the husband addressed, and then he is not told to crack the whip to compel submission (perish the thought!) but to enfold his wife in love (Ephesians 5:25; Colossians 3:19; 1 Peter 3:7) and then lead her in the way God wants her to carry out her God-given position in faith.

**SUBMISSION, THEN, IS VERY MUCH AN ACT OF FAITH,
AND SO OF ENTRUSTING HERSELF TO GOD'S CARE.**

Submission to her husband *does* mean that the wife embraces in humility that God her Creator fashioned her for a particular purpose. She shall flourish and reach her full potential, and enjoy life the most also, when she is what God created her to be. Submission, then, is very much an act of faith, and so of entrusting herself to God's care – a care God promises to give through this particular man. Submission (and the resulting obedience) is not a negative concept, is not a straitjacket, but a positive concept, a liberating one.

For this reason too submission may not be sporadic, but continuous. It may not be conditional (be it to moods or favors, etc), but spontaneously. It is certainly true that the fall into sin has damaged much in the relation between husband and wife., but the renewing work of the Holy Spirit gives the wife the strength of faith and the resulting wherewithal to fulfill the purpose for her existence – as the woman of Proverbs 31 shows.

1 Peter 3

The wife's submission to her husband has its distinct flavor. Peter gives us a sense of this flavor in the following passage:

"Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make them-

A VOW TO LOVE

selves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear" (1 Peter 3:1-6).

This particular instruction is directed to wives of unbelieving husbands. Though these husbands cannot be expected to act as a Christian husband ought to act (see Ephesians 5:25-33), the wives Peter addresses (Godly as they are and renewed by the Holy Spirit) need to recognize the ordinance of Genesis 2 and act accordingly. As with the women of Proverbs 31, 1 Timothy 5:14 and Titus 2:4,5, these sisters of the congregation are to be helpers to their (unbelieving) husbands in every aspect of life (of course, without disobeying God, see Acts 5:29). These women, then, are to be driven by their faith in God, and this faith –with its resulting actions– is to draw from their husbands a recognition that God's ordinance is good, so that they in turn under God's blessing come to faith. In a word: the husbands are to *"see the purity and reverence of [the women's] lives"* (vs 2).

Such reverence can only become manifest through a beauty that does *"not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes."* Not that outward adornment has no place; it does, as every husband will admit. But the outward adornment is very secondary to the true beauty of a woman, which is her faith in God and hence her quiet acceptance of the place God has given to her as helper to a particular man. This is the beauty of *"your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight,"* for it takes seriously God's revelation and God's ordinance, and so demonstrates respect for God (Proverbs 31:30). This is the kind of beauty that characterized *"the holy women of the past who put their hope in God,"* and so *"were submissive to their own husbands"* (vs 5). Sarah displayed that attitude, and so considered Abraham her master not just in words (see Genesis 18:12) but also in deeds. She obeyed her husband when God instructed him to move from their home in Ur of the Chaldeans, and obeyed again when God told Abraham to leave Haran for Canaan (see Acts 7:2-5). Rebekkah and Rachel and so many godly women did the same in the course of the years, and so became examples for the wives of Peter's day of what submission to one's husband means and how one is a help to him.

1 Timothy

This stress on true beauty comes out also in Paul's writing. He says, *"I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God"* (1 Timothy 2:9,10). Women

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who profess to worship God embrace the ordinance of Genesis 2 concerning the reason why God created the woman, and in faith such women will place emphasis on developing their talents in that direction. Such training produces “good deeds” as “*managing their homes*” (1 Timothy 5:14) in accordance with her place as helper to a husband.

**THERE’S TO BE A FULL PARALLEL BETWEEN THE
CHURCH’S SUBMISSION TO CHRIST AND THE WIFE’S
SUBMISSION TO HER HUSBAND.**

Ephesians 5

This brings us back to that passage from Ephesians 5 and its reference to “*a profound mystery*.” God in the beginning created marriage so that husband and wife should reflect in the dynamics of their relation something of the bond between God and man, and (after the fall) between Christ and the church. Eve was fashioned in order to be helper to Adam, and that’s to say that she was to serve her husband and seek his good. In so doing she was to submit to her head as mankind was to submit to God. This prefigures the conduct of the church in her relation to Christ, and is the instruction God gives to every bride. As Paul put it, “*Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything*” (Ephesians 5:24). The way the Greek is put together makes clear that there’s to be a full parallel between the church’s submission to Christ and the wife’s submission to her husband. As there is no place for hedging in the church’s submission to Christ her head, so there may be no place for hedging in the wife’s submission to her husband.

More, Eve was to show by her conduct that she trusted her husband’s leadership, even as the human race was to show by its conduct that it trusted God’s leadership and care. So too the wife today is to entrust herself to her husband’s leadership, even as the church does to Christ. This trust expresses itself in an attitude of respect for her husband. To quote Paul, “*the wife must respect her husband*” (Ephesians 5:33).

This, then, is also the mindset godly mothers today need to model for their daughters, and insist that the girls learn and make their own. Equally, this is the kind of girl today’s parents need to teach their boys to seek. Young Christian men do not need a wife who is caught up in her own (business) world, no more than they need a wife who is out and about as a gossip for wont of anything else to do. The Lord has ordained that a man needs a helper, one that is devoted to him and serves him with all she has – and so reflects that the Head of the church is trustworthy.

A VOW TO LOVE

Who Supports the Family?

At this point we need to go back to two quotes from the Marriage Form. To the husband the Form gave this instruction: *"Work faithfully in your daily calling, that you may support your family and also help those in need."* To the wife the Form gave a distinctly different instruction: *"Take proper care of your family and household, and live modestly, in faith, love, and holiness."* These quotes would have the husband seek the family income while the wife maintains the family home. Does the Form here echo (yesterday's) western culture or Biblical principle?

The answer lies in the ordinance of Genesis 2. The Lord God first formed only the man, placed him alone in the Garden, and told him alone to *"work it and take care of it"* (vs 15). The care for the Garden was his task and responsibility. When God thereafter created a wife for the man, his mandate and responsibility in the Garden did not change, nor did God repeat to the woman the command to *"work it and take care of it."* Her role in caring for the Garden was subservient to her role as helper to her husband. To the degree that he needed his helper in the Garden, to *that* degree did the woman have a task there.

The Lord God repeated this emphasis in His words to Adam and Eve on the day they fell into sin. *"To the woman He said, 'I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing'"* (Genesis 3:16). *"To Adam He said, '...Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life...'"* (Genesis 3:17). God's conversation with the woman depicts her as busy in the home, while His words to Adam describe him as busy in the fields, gathering the family income.

This structure is behind the command of God to Israel to *"not take advantage of a widow or an orphan"* (Exodus 22:22). The widow (female), like the orphan, was vulnerable because she no longer had a man to supply her needs. That the women of Paul's days were to *"manage their homes"* (1 Timothy 5:14) and *"be busy at home"* (Titus 2:5) follows directly from the ordinance of the beginning. The principle of Scripture is indeed that the husband work faithfully in his daily calling so that he can support his family, including his wife who as his helper focuses her efforts on his responsibilities and needs in the family home.

Does this prohibit all wives from any work outside the home? The principle is clear: the wife is to be helper to her husband. To what degree her involvement in his life (including business) can take her outside the home depends so very much on personal circumstances, talents and needs. The wife of Proverbs 31 was certainly not confined inside her home to the degree that she saw nothing of the outside world. Yet it ought not to be financial need or maintaining a (high) standard of living that motivates a couple to seek work

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for the wife. God has ordained other means to address financial stress (see 1 Timothy 5:4,8 and Acts 6:1-6).

Conclusion

By the ordinance of God, husband and wife are a team together, with each partner having their own specific place in the relationship. God has willed that the husband is the leader, and he needs to give leadership in the style that Christ has given leadership to the Church – He laid down His life for His bride. The man receives his fulfillment by being such a leader.

The wife is his helper, and she needs to serve her husband in his every need even as the church serves her Master Jesus Christ. This is the task that God in wisdom has given, and it is by carrying out this task to the best of her ability that the wife will be truly free and will flourish. This generates the praise of men, for *“her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her”* (Proverbs 31:28). More, this generates the praise of God: *“Well done, good and faithful servant!”* (Matthew 25:21).

A Post-word

The position described in the Marriage Form brings about snickers and protests from modern people. One of two things is true: either the Form does not catch what Scripture says, or it does. If the Form does not catch accurately what Scripture says, someone will need to show how Scripture teaches a better way (and at the same time how centuries of Bible interpretation was incorrect). If that cannot be done, we are duty bound to embrace in humility what God has revealed, and strive in His strength to live according to those principles in our marriages. To those who would protest that consequence I can only say: your argument is with God. And shall the pot fault the Potter for doing it wrong?? Our place is to accept in humility how the Creator has intended us to be. And the wonderful thing is this: once we accept in faith what God intended us to be (and so act accordingly) we shall flourish and feel fulfilled!

That’s no surprise, for the Maker knows best what’s in us.

Points for Discussion:

1. For women:
 - a. Discuss what you understand your role as wife in your marriage is.
 - b. Detail how you concretely fill that role.
 - c. Discuss what you think your husband (or fiancé) expects of you in your role as helper.

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2. For men:
 - a. Discuss what you understand your wife's role as helper is to be in your marriage.
 - b. Detail how, in your judgment, your wife fulfills that role.
 - c. Discuss what you think your wife's (or fiancée's) understanding of her role might be.
3. Why did God create a woman? What does this say about women being single? And what does it say about the way the man treats a woman?
4. How do you feel about the use of the term 'helper' in relation to the woman? Is the term demeaning to your ears? Ought it to be?
5. Is the role of the woman as helper limited to marriage or does it extend to other parts of life? If so, which? And why? How should this receive public expression?
6. How much of your time is devoted to helping your husband (including being a good manager of your home) compared to how much time is spent on other matters in your life? Is he happy with the balance? Do you have his permission for the activities to which you give yourself?
7. Does the woman of Proverbs 31 make you somewhat envious? Why or why not? In what way is she a role model for today's women? What is the correct lesson to learn from this wife?
8. Is it fitting for the wife to pursue a career? What place is her husband to have in her career?
9. Both in 1 Timothy 5 and in Titus 2 Paul insists on certain behavior in marriage lest God be publicly blasphemed. How big a factor ought this motive to be in how the Christian woman relates to her husband?
10. How do you feel about the need to 'submit' to your husband? Does the term mean that your input scarcely matters?
11. The Form has the wife "entrust herself" to her husband's loving care. What does 'entrusting oneself' look like? How do you display it in your marriage? Does your husband sense that you feel safe with his leadership and decisions? If not, why not?
12. How well does your relation with your husband reflect the church's position in relation to Christ? As the church is to show in her conduct that her Head is honorable, respectable and trustworthy, the wife is to do the same. Do your children and/or neighbors see this in your conduct?

CHAPTER NINE

The Triangle of Marriage

The first married couple on the face of the earth enjoyed the gift of marriage to perfection, with both Adam and Eve being for each other precisely the spouse God intended them to be. As the two related together as head and helper respectively, they imaged well what God was like in His relation with His people.

There came the day, though, when Eve, in Adam's presence, listened to the sinister advice of the serpent, and the human race fell into sin. From that moment on God's beautiful gift of marriage was broken, and desperately needed the redeeming work of Jesus Christ and the renewing work of His Spirit. By God's grace, Christ's redeeming and renewing work has restored something of marriage's former glory. For the benefit of couples marrying today, the Form for the Solemnization of Marriage catches the implications of these realities in the following words:

The Profound Mystery

"Husband and wife shall assist each other in all good things, heartily forgiving one another their sins and shortcomings. United in love, they will more and more reflect in their marriage the unity of Christ and His Church."

The Duties of Marriage

"Assist each other always and be faithful to each other. Diligently fulfill the calling which the Lord has given you in the church and in this world."

We hear in the closing words of the first quote an echo of that passage from Ephesians 5 as discussed in previous chapters, where the apostle would have husband and wife reflect in the dynamics of their marriage rela-

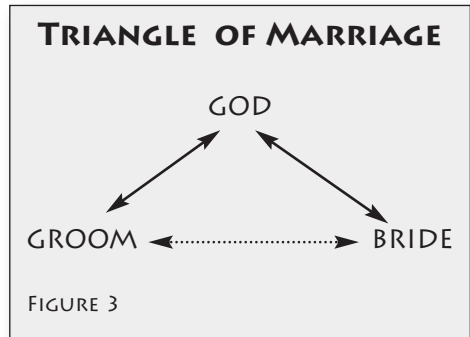
A VOW TO LOVE

tion something of the dynamic between Christ and the church. Does the Bible give us more insight into what this unity actually looks like? The answer is Yes, and it's the notion of the triangle of marriage that helps us understand.

The Marriage Triangle Formed

The Lord God created the human race to reflect what He was like. So say the Scriptures: *"God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them"* (Genesis 1:27). That man must image God describes a relation between God and man, both male and female, a relation known as a covenant, a bond of love from God to man (male and female) and from man (male and female) to God (Figure 3). On the basis of their mutual relation with God, there was of necessity a secondary bond between the first man and the first woman (in confessional terms we would call it the communion of saints).

As it is, the Lord God united the first man and the first woman in the bond of marriage. What held the first marriage together was not their mutual infatuation with each other, or their mutual dependence on each other for survival. Instead, the glue that bound their marriage together was their respective relationship with the Lord God. Marriage is ultimately not a relationship between two parties but between three, with God forming the apex of the relationship and serving also as the bond that keeps man and wife together. The vertical relation between God and Man and God and Woman respectively makes the horizontal connection between Man and Woman possible and lasting.



Adam and Eve in Paradise, then, were not two persons facing each other and delighting in what they saw, but they were two persons standing shoulder to shoulder facing God – and *then* delighting in what they saw. *He* was their praise and their delight, and *He* was their focus and their purpose. For Adam and Eve to focus on the creature (each other) was much too limited a perspective (not to mention idolatrous), for the creature (though sinless) was finite. But the God who made them and gave them each other in marriage was infinite, was *God*. Their combined focus on Him gave their marriage its strength and its joy.

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Communication – naked

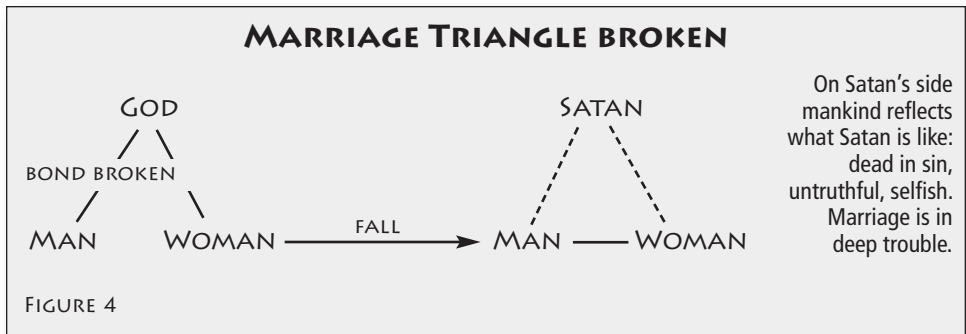
The consequence in turn was that *"the man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame"* (Genesis 2:25). God had intended the man to

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be leader in the marriage relationship and the woman to be his helper, an arrangement that necessitated communication, openness of thought, sharing of feelings. More, God intended the two to be *"one flesh"* (Genesis 2:24), a reference first of all not to sexual unity but to unity of being, unity of heart, unity of purpose and intent – all of which require communication, openness of thought and sharing of feelings. The nakedness of the man and his wife was a symbol of the openness of their hearts to each other; they shared their deepest feelings and were for each other an open book. Together they delighted in the service of the God who made them, and they shared in perfect openness all their cares and all their pleasures in the service of this God.

The Marriage Triangle Broken

The fall into sin broke the triangle of marriage. Through their disobedience to God's command, Adam and Eve severed their covenant relation with God and settled for a relation with Satan (Figure 4). As children of Satan, Adam and Eve no longer reflected what God was like, but from now on reflected what Satan was like. The Lord Jesus Christ described what being a child of Satan was like when He spoke to the unbelieving Jews: *"You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies"* (John 8:44). Paul describes belonging to Satan as *"gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts"* (Ephesians 2:3). Elsewhere he lists the resulting *"acts of the sinful nature...: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ... hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like"* (Galatians 5:19-21). The common denominator characterizing those who belong to the devil and do his works is *selfishness*. That's in fact inevitable; those who take their focus off God their Creator fix it invariably on a creature, and hence listen to the selfishness that comes from our depravity.



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The classic proof of this posture is the action of the first man and his wife on the day of their fall. Whereas in Paradise they had stood shoulder-to-shoulder as they delighted in God, after the fall they pointed fingers of blame at each other. Said the man to God about his wife, "*The woman you put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate*" (Genesis 3:12). On a very superficial level Adam's words were true, for they related what happened. But Adam had no right to blame his wife for his transgression, for God had created the man to be the leader – and so Adam ought to take responsibility for his wife's actions as well as his own. But he didn't, and didn't mention his failure to take responsibility for his wife's actions either. In this posture lay deceit, and selfishness.

The same is true in relation to Eve. She said to God, "*The serpent deceived me, and I ate*" (Genesis 3:13). Again, on a superficial level this recounted the facts. But the woman was meant to be a helper to the man, and she failed dismally in her duty to him. In reply to God's question she had no right to speak about the serpent, but ought to have spoken about her failure in relation to her husband. She didn't, and this omission (like Adam's failure) represented a lie, and was driven by a depraved need to defend the self at the expense of another – attitudes and actions characteristic of those in league with the devil.

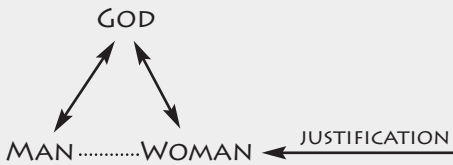
Communication – shame

The selfishness characterizing those on Satan's side damaged immeasurably also the 'one flesh-ness' that God had ordained between husband and wife. The unity of heart and being, the oneness of desire and purpose, was shattered as soon as Adam and Eve took their focus off God to do their own thing. Instead of now sharing their hearts and souls, instead of being an open book to each other, they now felt vulnerable, too open in front of each other. "*They realized they were naked,*" and so hastened to "*sew fig leaves together*" to cover themselves (Genesis 3:7) – though there was no other person present. Their sense of shame on account of their nakedness was symbolic of their unwillingness to be totally open any longer in their deepest thoughts; those thoughts and feelings, selfish as they inherently were, could no longer be comfortably shared, not even with the spouse. Communication was rendered difficult, awkward, superficial. And the consequence is inevitably loneliness in marriage.

The Marriage Triangle Repaired

The Lord God in boundless mercy set about delivering His people from Satan's bondage. In the hearing of the first couple, He declared war on Satan, and pronounced too that the woman's offspring would crush the head of the devil (Genesis 3:15). This is the gospel of redemption proclaimed in the sacri-

MARRIAGE TRIANGLE RESTORED



Through Christ's work on the cross some are taken from Satan's side and restored back to God's side.

Those justified by Christ's blood are also sanctified by Christ's Spirit so that they bring forth the fruit of the Spirit, and reflect again what God is like.

FIGURE 5

fices of Israel's temple, the gospel that was fulfilled when Jesus son of Mary went to the cross of Calvary to satisfy the justice of God and pay for sin. Through Christ's atoning sacrifice, *"He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins"* (Colossians 1:13,14). This rescue and its resulting redemption is commonly known as justification, God's divine declaration of sinners being righteous in His sight (Figure 5).

The persons the Lord God brought back from Satan's side to His side are not only justified through Jesus' blood; these persons, dead as they were in sin, are also renewed through Jesus' Spirit and made alive. This change or renewal is known as sanctification, and is the result of God in the Spirit making His home in the heart of a given sinner. This renewal, then, restores in principle the relation there was between God and man in Paradise. A person renewed by the Spirit of Jesus Christ is made able once more to image what God is like. He brings forth *"the fruit of the Spirit": "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control"* (Galatians 5:22,23), and so reflects the characteristics of what God is like.

When the Lord God in His providence and grace, then, unites two renewed people in marriage, the chemistry between the two is no longer determined by anything of this world (including selfishness), but is determined once again by their respective relation to God. We're back to the triangle of marriage as God ordained it in the beginning, where the vertical bond of love between the Lord God and His child-by-covenant is the glue that unites husband and wife together. Those redeemed by Jesus' blood and renewed by His Spirit possess a marital relation that's not limited to the two of them, but it's again a relation including the three. God is again at the center and is the focus of both the husband and the wife. Husband and wife do not face each other

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such that they see only another finite creature (sinful still!) but they stand again shoulder-to-shoulder with their focus directed on the God who created, redeemed and renewed them. It is their joint service of the one God that gives the drive and direction to their marriage, and hence gives the tools to overcome trouble in marriage.

Communication – know

Just how powerful this renewing work of the Holy Spirit is in relation to marriage receives some illustration in the Holy Spirit's choice of words concerning Adam and Eve. The New King James Version renders the Hebrew accurately: "*Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain*" (Genesis 4:1).¹⁶ That the Holy Spirit would use here the verb 'to know' is intriguing. He does not do so because of a perceived awkwardness with straight talk; in fact, if the Holy Spirit simply wanted us to know that Adam and Eve received a son He could (and would) have said so plainly. As it is, the Holy Spirit tells God's people how this conception came about; it happened through his 'knowing' her. That's to say: Eve was again an open book for Adam (and he for her); they could again be one in heart, one in purpose. With the eye of both Adam and Eve directed again on God and His mercy in Jesus Christ, this couple did not have to feel guilty anymore on account of their depravity (and so hide a selfish heart from each other) but could instead delight in His forgiveness. Again, with their eye fixed on the Lord God, they could delight in His renewing work in their hearts so that the selfishness characterizing children of the devil was in principle overcome. They could dare to be open again to each other and not be vulnerable or ashamed. The intimacy of shared hearts opened the way for intimacy of shared bodies, and God blessed that unity-of-being with the gift of conception so that Eve bore Adam a son.

The Marriage Triangle Pursued

When children of God then seek a spouse, the focus of the search may not center on physical beauty or on talent or wealth or any other outward thing. The one, single criterion of paramount importance is whether the girl in question has a strong relation with God. Specifically, has she responded in faith to the glorious promises God has given in Jesus Christ, so that her heart is obviously renewed and she brings forth the fruit of the Spirit? Similarly, when a girl receives an approach from a young man, the one, single criterion she needs to be satisfied about first of all is not whether this young man is handsome or drives a particular car, but what the strength of his relation with God might be. The bridegroom is to lead his bride in God's service, and the bride is to help her groom in His service, and for both to carry out their God-given functions they both need to have their eye fixed in trust and obedience on God alone. A bride

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and groom one-eyed on each other will (unless God works change) end up unhappily married.

Again, when parents seek to raise their sons and their daughters, it is the development of this vertical relation with God that must stand central in their efforts. Daughters will never be able to serve as a helper to a man in his task before God if she has been trained to focus on outward beauty. Sons will never be able to be leaders for a wife if parents have let them focus on the toys of life.

BRIDE AND GROOM ONE-EYED ON EACH OTHER WIL END UP UNHAPPILY MARRIED.

Similarly, once a young Christian man becomes interested in a woman, it will never do for a him to choose a spouse from among those still on Satan's side. Equally, it will never do for a young Christian woman to respond in kind to the advances of a man still on Satan's side. In the strength of the Holy Spirit Paul is emphatic: *"Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be My people'"* (2 Corinthians 6:14-16). The glue that ties a marriage together is severely compromised if one party in the marriage has no living relation with God. One may not marry one who, contrary to the first commandment, has other gods before the Lord.

The same is true concerning those Christians who serve God in a self-chosen manner (second commandment). When one looks for a spouse, one needs to seek more than *whether* the other has a relation with God; he (or she) needs to determine also *what sort of* relation the other has with God. Is the prospective partner a so-called 'Sunday Christian'? Is this person casual and laid-back in God's service, with one eye on God and the other firmly focused on the things of this world? Such a person lacks something in zeal for God, and you cannot have standing beside you as a leader or a helper one whose attention is distracted from the central Party to a marriage. Recall: it's the relation to God that forms the glue that keeps a marriage strong and healthy, and it's equally that relation to God that makes openness in communication possible in marriage.

And say not that through your courtship you will bring the other to faith, or even strengthen his (or her) relation with God such that he will be-

A VOW TO LOVE

come undividedly devoted to God. Paul's word to the Corinthians holds true: "*How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?*" (1 Corinthians 7:16). It simply does not lie within man's ability to work faith or strengthen it. The two vertical lines of the triangle of the potential marriage must be healthy and strong *before* one allows one's heart to be joined to the other's heart in love.

The Triangle Maintained

The strength of one's relation to God is never static, nor can one insist that one's relation with God has 'arrived' so that it will sustain itself. The relation God wants with His people is to be living and dynamic, one that interacts with the changing circumstances God in His providence puts on the path of His children. In the midst of those changing cares and joys, the Lord wants His people to stay focused on Him with undivided attention, and interact with Him about those ups and downs. God has given His word so that it may be a light on the path His people are to walk, casting His divine illumination on the questions and challenges and opportunities of each day. The Lord has given His people the gift of prayer so that they can speak with Him about the happy things of each day, as well as about the questions that arise. That's the covenant bond with God *alive* in the lives of His children; there's open communication between God's people and their God. Husband and wife both, then, need to develop and maintain active Bible study and times of prayer.

Yet in marriage God has joined two of His children together so that they are one. The living relation each is to have with God in the grind of life may not be private and isolated from the spouse; on the contrary, their unity of being and of purpose dictates that they share their life's questions together in open and joint communication with God. To maintain the triangle of marriage, the couple needs to answer life's questions *together* over an open Bible, and together speak to God from their hearts. The saying has it that 'the family that prays together stays together,' and it's so true in relation to husband and wife first of all. Every problem the Lord may put on their path (be it financial strain, sickness, barrenness, unemployment or even friction between the two) can and will be manageable when the two are one in prayer and in listening to God's Word.

Communication – the fruit of the Spirit

Keeping the triangle of marriage intact requires more than husband and wife being united in Scripture study and prayer. The two must also adorn their relationship with a lifestyle that results from the renewing work of the Holy Spirit, and so reflects what the Lord God is like. In his letter to the Ephesians the apostle instructed his readers what a renewed life looks like. His in-

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struction is of particular relevance for the way the regenerated husband and wife treat each other. The relevant passage reads as follows:

"Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. 'In your anger do not sin': Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 4:25-5:2).

With the word 'therefore' the apostle links this passage to what he had said in previous verses about how those who belong to Christ put off their old self and put on the new self that is "*created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness*" (vs 24). The first consequence Paul mentions relates to truth vs falsehood. Jesus had said that Satan is "*a liar and the father of lies*" (John 8:44). Those taken from Satan's side and restored to God's side no longer reflect what Satan is like, and are therefore to "*put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor*" (vs 25). The first and closest neighbor one ever receives is the spouse with whom one is "*one flesh*" (Genesis 2:24). In a Christian marriage there is simply no place for deceit in any way. There is need instead for openness about all things (other than what the birthday present will be), as a couple's identity as "*one flesh*" dictates. Speaking less than the truth to one's spouse breeds distrust, and distrust leads to tension.

Paul mentions next that those whom the Spirit renewed are not to "*let the sun go down while you are still angry*" (vs 26). In this broken life, disagreements and tensions occur, as do clashes that make one angry with another. Paul insists that Christians are not to let the anger fester, but must resolve the issue before sundown. In relation to marriage, it may not happen that a couple goes to sleep back to back, each on their own side of the bed. Jesus had said emphatically that "*if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then*

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come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23,24). The gift at the Old Testament altar, whether sin offering or burnt offering or thank offering, amounted to a prayer. In a Christian marriage a couple will seek to end the day in prayer together. Yet the Lord God forbids such prayer together as long as the dispute between the two is not resolved, for "*the LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases Him*" (Proverbs 15:8). To leave a matter unresolved so that anger characterizes the atmosphere in the marriage destroys not just the horizontal relation between husband and wife, but corrodes also the vertical relation between husband and God and/or wife and God. The fruit of the Spirit is "*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*" (Galatians 5:22,23), while the acts of the sinful nature include "*hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy*" (Galatians 5:20,21). Unresolved anger may have no place in the hearts and lives of two persons in whom the Holy Spirit has made His home, lest the devil receive opportunity to work his destruction.

THERE IS IN CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE NO ROOM TO INSIST THAT CERTAIN THINGS ARE 'MINE'

The apostle speaks also about doing honest work so that one "*may have something to share with those in need*" (vs 28). The closest neighbor one receives is one's spouse, the person with whom one is "*one flesh*". Together husband and wife stand shoulder-to-shoulder in the service of their common Lord and Master, and surely that means too that each shares with the other whatever is needed in the service of this God. There is in Christian marriage no room to insist that certain things are 'Mine' such that it's private property from which the spouse must keep his or her distance. To be jealous of your own possessions betrays that both eyes are not fixed solely on the Lord God, but one eye overly adores something of this earth. That will invariably damage something in the marriage relation.

Words can do so much damage. Paul insists that the Ephesian saints are not to "*let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen*" (vs 29). Though the principle is true for all conversation, it is true particularly in the Christian marriage. To talk down or to disparage or to criticize or to humiliate the spouse (whether privately or publicly) is more akin to what characterizes Satan's behavior than what characterizes the Lord God. Words and actions in Christian marriage are instead to be characterized by "*kindness, goodness, ...gentleness and self-control,*" those fruits of the Spirit

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listed in Galatians 5:22,23. Given that list, it simply will not do to shout and scream, or to vent one's frustration through a tirade listing the other's weaknesses. The vertical bond one has with God, the Spirit's presence in one's heart, must come out in the color one gives to the horizontal bond you have with your spouse. Anything else *"grieves the Holy Spirit of God"* (Ephesians 4:30).

Hence the apostle's injunction too to *"get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice."* Rather, *"be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you"* (vss 31,32). On account of our original sin as well as our actual sins, God would have been more than justified to leave us on Satan's side, with all the misery that came with that. But God in mercy gave up His only Son in order to redeem lost sinners. This Son went to the anguish of the cross to carry in our place the judgment we deserved. Through His work we receive forgiveness of sins and have peace with God. Shall we now –who received so much mercy from God– be cold and unforgiving to the spouse? If God demonstrated His love for us by having Christ die for us *"while we were still sinners"* (Romans 5:8), shall we insist that the spouse clean up his act before we extend a modicum of mercy? The fruit the Spirit works in renewed hearts includes *"love, ...peace, ...kindness."* Then we cannot keep bringing up old issues but shall instead forgive and today enfold the other with love and kindness – whether deserving (in our judgment) or not. It's an attitude Christian couples can extend to each other simply because the Spirit of Jesus Christ has made His home in their hearts.

As Paul concludes, *"Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly beloved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God"* (Ephesians 5:1,2). *"Gave Himself up"*: those words catch so accurately what attitude husband is to have to wife and wife is to have to husband. As Christ Himself said, *"the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many"* (Matthew 20:28). Through such self-emptying, husband and wife (as the Form puts it) *"more and more reflect in their marriage the unity of Christ and His Church"* – a unity Paul lays out like this in that passage so frequently referred to earlier:

"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to Himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church – for we

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are members of His body. 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband" (Ephesians 5:25-33).

Points for Discussion:

1. In the light of marriage as a triangle, draw out why Paul writes what he says in 2 Corinthians 6:14-18. Does Paul give a different signal in 1 Corinthians 7:13,14?
2. What was communicated through the nakedness of the first couple in Paradise? Why did they seek to cover themselves after the fall? What lesson follows in relation to nakedness today outside of the marriage bedroom?
3. Do you know what goes on in your spouse's mind? Is he (or she) an open book to you? If not, why not? Similarly, are there areas of your life you keep hidden from your spouse? If yes, why do you do that? Consider ways to improve the openness between you and your spouse.
4. What place does nakedness have in Christian marriage? What relation is there between nakedness of heart and nakedness of body? Which of the two is primary?
5. Is there place for husband and wife to have separate bank accounts, with the transactions of the respective accounts kept secret from the spouse? Why or why not?
6. Describe your Bible reading and Bible study habits. Do you spend time in Bible study with your spouse? Why or why not? Are the questions and struggles of the day incorporated into your discussions? Again, why or why not?
7. Do you pray separately at the end of the day or together? Who leads in prayer? Why do you have the habit that you have? Does it do proper justice to the openness there ought to be?
8. Do you have hard feelings against your spouse? If yes, what would the Lord have you do to get past your hard feelings? Assess too how your hard feelings have affected your relationship.
9. Assess whether in your marriage you sufficiently follow the instruction of Ephesians 4:25-5:2. In what matters could you improve? In what matters could you assist your spouse in improving?
10. Does there have to be repentance and/or a willingness to change before you forgive your spouse's wrongdoing? See Matthew 6:12,14,15 and Matthew 18:21-35.

¹⁶ NIV has: "Adam lay with his wife Eve." NASB has: "Now the man had relations with his wife Eve." The NEV has the same as the NKJV.

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Trouble in Marriage

The bride and groom seeking to marry today enter the married state in a fallen world. Though Christ has triumphed over sin and Satan on the cross of Calvary and has even poured out His Holy Spirit for His people's benefit, those who marry in the Lord continue to live in a broken world – and they will experience this brokenness bitterly. The Form for the Solemnization of Marriage sets this reality before the couple with these words:

The Profound Mystery

"Although it is true, as the apostle says, that those who marry will face trouble in this state and because of sin will experience many difficulties and afflictions, yet they may also believe the promise of God that they, as heirs of the grace of life, will always receive His aid and protection, even when they least expect it."

This Present Crisis

The quote from the apostle as mentioned in this paragraph comes from 1 Corinthians 7. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Paul writes these striking words: *"Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are. Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife."* He adds this reason to justify his judgment: *"those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this"* (1 Corinthians 7:26-28).

What prompts the apostle to write this? Paul had received a letter from the Corinthian congregation, in which the saints of that city defended the position that *"it is good for a man not to touch a woman"* (1 Corinthians 7:1).¹⁷ In his reply Paul addressed the brothers and sisters of Corinth concerning the married (vss 2-7), the unmarried and widows (vss 8,9), those married to an un-

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believer (vss 10-16), and finally the fathers of girls of marriageable age (vss 25-38). (In vss 17-24 Paul encourages the Corinthians to maintain the marital circumstance in which they lived at the time they came to faith.)

Fathers in Corinth (as today) were responsible for their daughters, and had to give their approval to a prospective marriage. As these fathers were considering marriage for their daughters, Paul reminded them that daughters *"who marry will face many troubles in this life"* (1 Corinthians 7:28).

PAUL IS NOT ADVISING FATHERS TO FORBID A DAUGHTER'S DESIRE FOR MARRIAGE.

To be upfront: Paul is *not* advising fathers to forbid a daughter's desire for marriage. He says so plainly: *"if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned"* (vs 28). Instead, Paul's point is that fathers (and mothers) do well not to hold up marriage as the dream world where one rises above all trouble. The apostle knows that we live in a fallen world, and even marriage does not restore one to a paradise. In fact, marriage can distinctly form a distraction from the service of the Lord. Vs 34: *"An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world – how she can please her husband."* There's nothing wrong with seeking to please her husband (or his wife), but it may not be at the cost of service to the Lord God. Paul sums up his concern like this: *"I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord"* (vs 35).

Undivided Devotion

Undivided devotion! The term sets before us the triangle of marriage, where the bride and the groom stand shoulder-to-shoulder facing the Lord God – with undivided devotion to Him. Yet precisely such undivided devotion is so difficult because of *"the present crisis"* (1 Corinthians 7:26). Paul explains his point: *"What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away"* (vss 29-31). Paul's inspired reference to *"this present crisis"* is not limited to a specific emergency in Corinth, but describes the entirety of the New Testament dispensation. Because of Christ's triumph over sin and Satan on Calvary and His

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subsequent enthronement in heaven, Satan is in a terrible rage and has gone off *"to make war against"* the people of God (Revelation 12; see also John 15:18-16:4; Acts 4:24-29; Ephesians 6:12; 2 Timothy 3:12). Paul would have those who marry to be under no illusion that marriage might provide in some way a haven of protection from this rage of the devil. In fact, the devil will use even the gift of marriage to try to drive a child of God away from God.

How might Satan do that? In His parable of the great banquet, Jesus gives us an example. *"A certain man ... invited many guests."* But *"at the time of the banquet ... they all alike began to make excuses.... Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come'"* (Luke 14:16-20). The force of the lesson is this: one can get so caught up in the pleasures or responsibilities of marriage that one's eye is no longer fixed with undivided devotion on God alone; the spouse requires and/or demands attention. It's as Paul described it: *"a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world – how he can please his wife – A married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world – how she can please her husband"* (1 Corinthians 7:33,34). In this broken world this desire to fix an eye on each other instead of standing shoulder-to-shoulder with eyes fixed on the Lord alone is an opportunity for the devil to attack the Christian's service to God. Tension between the couple will suffice to suit the devil's purpose, as will extreme infatuation with each other – as long as there isn't that *"undivided devotion"* to the Lord.

This, then, is Paul's intent in the passage. When a father considers giving his daughter in marriage, both he and his daughter (and the prospective bridegroom as well) should be keenly aware of what Satan will attempt to do. Beautiful as marriage is, and much as one may long for it, the holy married state is not Paradise restored. The devil most certainly will use the sparks that invariably arise from two sinners living together in his effort to drive a wedge between one sinner (or both) and God. *"Those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this"* (1 Corinthians 7:28).

This is the passage the Marriage Form quotes in the context of trouble in marriage. With the quote, neither Paul nor the Form want to give the signal that one ought actually not to marry. Instead, Paul (and the Form too) would have those who marry recognize the reality of Satan's hatred, and be forewarned that he shall certainly attack the couple in their married state.

God's Aid and Protection

This reality should not discourage the couple. After all, Satan does not and cannot have the last word. Christ the Lord has been triumphant over the devil, so that today Christ is sovereign over the entire world – including the holy state of marriage and those who are married. The God who has ordained marriage, and who in His providence leads a couple to marry, continues to sus-

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tain and protect those whom He in wisdom unites to become one flesh. His promise is sure; *"they, as heirs of the grace of life, will always receive His aid and protection, even when they least expect it"* – as the Form so aptly puts it.

Indeed, given who God is, it cannot be otherwise. If this God *"did not spare His own Son"* to redeem sinners, *"but gave Him up for us all – how will He not also ... graciously give us all things,"* including protection in the face of Satan's attacks? The evil one hates God's own desperately, but *"who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?"* With Paul we can stand tall on the promises of our God: *"I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height or depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Romans 8:31-39).

Psalm 128

Hence the bold reassurance given in the Form to the marrying couple: *"Believe God's sure promise, 'Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in His ways. You will eat the fruit of your labor; blessings and prosperity will be yours.'"* This quote comes from Psalm 128, a Song of Ascents. For reasons that need not detain us now, commentators tend to agree that this psalm dates from the period after the exile. As the Israelites made their tedious way from Babylon back to the Promised Land where the temple of God once stood, a poetically minded member of the group penned the words of this psalm for the travelers to sing. The group was aware that the challenge ahead was enormous, for it was no secret that the temple had been destroyed, and no secret either that the houses of the fathers were in ruins and the city walls broken down. In the land to which they were returning, everything had to be built up again from scratch. Ahead was trouble in the form of sweat, toil, tears and frustration. And that's to say nothing of opposition the returning exiles would experience from those now living in their land....

But as the group traveled along they broke out into optimistic singing: *"Blessed are all who fear the LORD."* The almighty God who established His covenant of grace with Israel – *"the LORD"* is His name– is faithful to bless all who fear Him, who take Him and His Word seriously and so stand in awe of Him. Such people He blesses, and the force of the word 'bless' is that He makes them the envy of others. Specifically, the God of the covenant will shower such favour on those who walk in His ways that He will grant them the privilege to eat from the fruit of their hard work, and make them happy and do them good. The traveling Israelites sing of further blessings: *"your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your sons will be like olive shoots around your table"* (vs 3). For exiles who knew they had to build their lives from scratch, this was distinctly optimistic language!

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On what grounds, we wonder, could these traveling Israelites rest their confidence? They could rest their confidence on God's identity as **God**. This is the One who in His boundless mercy claimed Israel for Himself with the promise *"to be your God and the God of your descendants after you"* (Genesis 17:7), and what else does that mean than that He would do Israel good? This is the pattern God began in Paradise when He established a relation of gracious love with man-made-of-dust, and continued that relation when man fell into sin. This is the pattern God continued for undeserving Israel when He delivered His people from Egypt, gave them manna in the desert, dwelt among them in the tabernacle He had them build, caused the gospel of redemption to be proclaimed in the sacrifices and ceremonies of the tabernacle, settled them in the promised land, gave them kings as David and Solomon, permitted a temple to be built in Jerusalem as a dwelling place for Himself, and so much more. The result of His goodness was that the people of Israel *"ate, they drank and they were happy"* (1 Kings 4:20) – a foretaste of the bliss of Paradise Restored. None of it, of course, was deserved; all was instead a gift of God's grace through the Savior He would one day send. When the Israelites, then, came back from exile and gave expression to the hope of faith within them (even while ahead of them lay unimaginable difficulties) they could indeed confidently sing of the happiness in store for them. They knew who their God was!

This God has not changed with the passage of time. On the contrary, He has shown the full measure of His goodness and mercy to His people with the gift of His only Son. Since Jesus Christ has reconciled sinners to God, God's people can be confident of His blessings no matter what difficulties He in wisdom may place on their path. The Form rightly draws the attention of the marrying couple to the confidence the psalmist expressed in Psalm 128. Married life will have its challenges, for marriage is no haven from the storms of Satan's attacks. But God's promise is sure: *"Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in His ways. You will eat the fruit of your labor; blessings and prosperity will be yours."* In truth, *"they, as heirs of the grace of life, will always receive His aid and protection, even when they least expect it."*

That in turn is why at the conclusion of the marriage ceremony we can confidently pray for the young couple according to the words prescribed in the Marriage Form: *"Lift up Your countenance upon them, and guide them in prosperity and adversity by Your fatherly hand"* – and then conclude this prayer with a resounding *"Amen"*, certain that God undoubtedly hears and answers this petition.

The fact that couples will certainly experience trouble in the married state may, then, not discourage them in any way. Instead, the reality of trouble will drive them to Jesus Christ, and compel them to acknowledge their dependence on their faithful Saviour. And God's mercy will carry them as long as

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they both live in faith before Him. In His strength each can be the spouse God wants them to be, and so, despite weakness and attack, fulfill something of the reason why God created the gift of marriage in the first place.

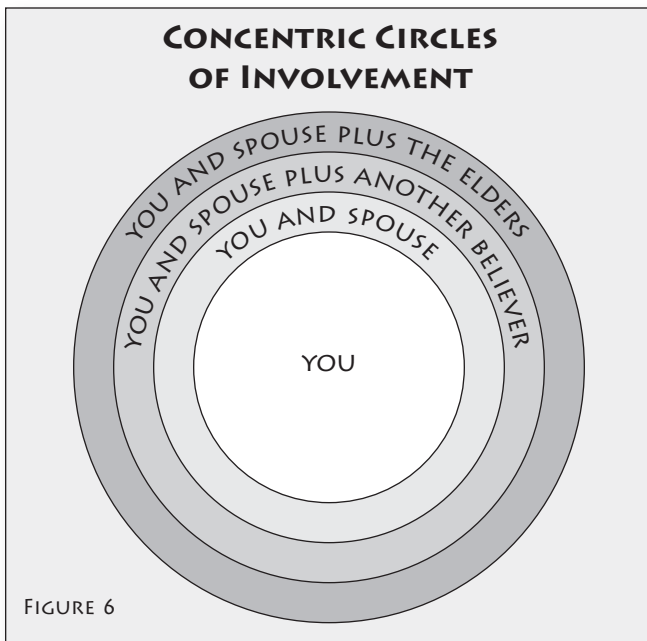
Resolution of Trouble

Two sinners marry. Though God promises His aid and protection, sparks can fly between spouses, and tensions may arise. Satan will do what he can to hinder the husband from being *husband* as the Form describes his role, and will do what he can to hinder the wife also from being *wife* as the Form describes her role. What is one to do? How does one encourage the spouse to be the husband/wife God wants him/her to be? I'd like to answer the question by referring to four concentric circles of involvement (Figure 6).

You alone

The first circle consists of you alone. You notice that your spouse is not living up to the demands of God as caught in the Marriage Form. Your husband, for example, is negligent in giving leadership in your marriage or (as the case might be) your wife is refusing to submit to you and/or carrying out the role of the helper. A problem in your marriage needs to drive you first and foremost to God in prayer. Marriage, we've said before, is not simply a relation

between two people, but fundamentally involves three – with husband and wife forming the base points of the triangle and God forming the apex. The strength of a marriage relation does not depend on the feelings the husband and wife have for each other (important as they are), but depends ultimately on their respective bond with God. How the spouse carries out his or her God-given task in the marriage relation is commentary on



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the spouse's relation with God; how much will he (or she) deny self to accept in faith the task description God has given? How much will he (or she) entrust the self to God and believe that He will give the wisdom needed for the task – and the satisfaction? Imploring the Lord for His grace on the spouse stems from recognition that marriage is His gift and His work.

The Couple Together

The second circle consists of you together with your spouse. Where the spouse does not, in your estimation, live up to the obligations belonging to marriage, you must speak with your spouse about your concerns. It must be done with an open Bible, with the ever-present question in mind: what does the Lord require of us as husband and wife respectively, and what does He promise to us? Inasmuch as the Form for the Solemnization of Marriage catches the Biblical picture well, the couple does well to read that Form together again, and then ask themselves and each other to consider whether they are in fact living up to the promises made on the wedding day. More, the couple does well to lay their respective concerns together before God's throne of grace to seek His instruction and guidance. Under His blessing, husband and wife can help each other come to better insights concerning what God requires of them and promises to them. Such conversation can bring about wonderful growth, and improved understanding.

The Couple plus another Believer

In the event open conversation between husband and wife does not bring about the desired improvement (or perhaps is impeded by some obstacle), the Scriptures would have us move to a third circle. One needs to bring into the marriage the assistance of someone competent to help. Biblically speaking the help husband and/or wife brings into the marriage is not first of all a professional counselor, but is instead a fellow believer. Remember: what keeps husband and wife together is not first of all the horizontal relation between the two, but is primarily the vertical relation between each of them and God. The Lord God has poured out His Holy Spirit and so endowed all believers with spiritual wisdom. As a result, all God's people are "*competent to instruct one another*" (Romans 15:14). So the apostle Paul could instruct Titus to "*teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live.... Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God*" (Titus 2:3-5). If the Lord God has given the older women of the congregation the mandate to train the younger women, surely it is fitting for a young couple experiencing tension to seek the assistance of (an) older sister(s) of the congregation. For that matter,

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there is no reason why they cannot seek the assistance of (an) older brother(s) too. Those whom God has endowed with years of experience are a resource others in the congregation do well to use – for mutual edification. The assistance God makes available through the professionals of the secular world has a place only after one has exhausted the resources found amongst those whom the Spirit has made “*competent to instruct one another.*”

A HUSBAND AND WIFE BLESSED WITH AN ATTITUDE OF HUMBLE WILLINGNESS WILL COME FAR IN BEING FOR EACH OTHER THE SPOUSE GOD WANTS THEM TO BE.

The input from this third circle will not necessarily result in the husband and/or wife now becoming the ideal spouse. In this broken life, such a goal will remain illusive. We all have different talents and different abilities; not every husband, for example, is a born leader, and not every wife finds it easy to submit. Vital, though, is the attitude with which one responds to the place and task God has given. Does the husband do his best to take up the responsibilities that come with being the leader? Does the wife do her best, in the strength of the Lord, to be a fitting helper to her husband? Though brokenness remains, a husband and wife blessed with an attitude of humble willingness will come far in being for each other the spouse God wants them to be.

The Couple and the Elders

It may also become evident from the work of the third circle that there is with the husband or the wife (or both) *unwillingness* to accept the specific responsibilities and privileges that God has laid on the shoulders of husband and/or wife. Unwillingness is sin. It is sin against God and sin against the spouse. What is one to do in the face of the spouse’s unwillingness to be the spouse God wants him to be? Jesus gives this instruction: “*If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you*” (Matthew 18:15). Though we do not quickly relate this familiar text to marriage, it certainly does apply to marriage as well; in fact, your spouse is the “*brother*” (or sister) closest to you and so the one most able to “*sin against you.*” “*If he listens to you, you have won your brother over*” – and improved your marriage. And “*if he will not listen*”? After due process his (or her) unwillingness needs to be drawn to the attention of the elders of the church, and they shall need to use the spiritual tools God has given them to deal with sin. This is the fourth circle of responsibility and opportunity to give relief in a stressed marriage.

Again, under God’s blessing there will come repentance and hence ac-

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ceptance of one's God-given role as husband or wife. Conversely, there may not come repentance but hardening – which will in turn lead to excommunication. Then the words of the apostle apply: *"If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him"* (1 Corinthians 7:12,13). Such a life is undoubtedly difficult. Peter shows how one can, in the strength of the Lord, still be the spouse God wants one to be: *"wives, ...be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives"* (1 Peter 3:1,2). The same attitude, of course, would apply from husband to unbelieving wife.

Love

Feelings can be easily hurt. Our fallen natures have us nurse those hurt feelings, and so hold a grudge. Within marriage this can lead to so much damage, distrust, and trouble. I need not repeat what was written in the previous chapter about how communication in marriage is to be characterized by the fruits of the Spirit. I wish only to add at this point that, as one seeks resolution of troubles in marriage, Paul's words to the Corinthians are to the point: *"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres"* (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). At the marriage ceremony bride and groom both promised to love the spouse till death them would part. It is when disappointment arises in relation to the spouse that love is tested. Here is where the fruit of the Spirit, including love, shall need to triumph over feelings of hurt. Under God's blessing, love can overcome much sin, and a strained relationship be restored.

Points for Discussion:

1. Why does Paul write in 1 Corinthians 7:27 that the unmarried do well to remain unmarried? How does Paul's instruction in this passage affect your plans for marriage? How is this passage to feature in parents' discussions with their courting children? Does Paul actually want parents to discourage their children from marrying?
2. What is the principle temptation facing any newly married couple? What are Satan's thoughts about that? Assess your own marriage in light of such temptation.

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3. How can infatuation with the other affect family Bible study, let alone attendance at Men's Society or Women's Society? Is a year away from Bible study (see Deuteronomy 24:5) a reasonable practice for newly weds? Why or why not?
4. Draw out the comfort and encouragement contained in Psalm 128.
5. What are the four circles of involvement that a couple can use to tackle trouble in their relationship? How does this work in your own marriage?
6. Ought you to seek assistance from a counselor in the event of strife with your spouse? Why or why not? If yes, what sort of person ought this counselor to be? Does it matter whether he (or she) is a believer? Older than you or younger? Someone who knows you or a stranger? Is there any merit in you 'adopting' from within your congregation or circle of acquaintances a father or mother figure as mentor in your marriage? Explain.
7. Solomon reminds the people of Israel that "love covers over all wrongs" (Proverbs 10:12). What is the implication of this verse for the way you respond to the sins and weaknesses of your spouse? Do you feel your spouse acts towards you according to Solomon's instruction? If not, what should/can you do about it?
8. It is difficult to live with a grouchy spouse. What instruction does Paul give in Romans 12:17-21 that pertains to this point?

¹⁷ This translation comes from the NKJV. The NIV is inaccurate when it renders the verse as *"it is good for a man not to marry."* The Corinthians' beef wasn't with marriage but with sexual relations. See page ??

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Intimacy in Marriage

Before the young couple can be declared husband and wife (and then embark on their honeymoon), the *Form for the Solemnization of Marriage* addresses them on the purpose of marriage. Why did God create this institution? The *Form* mentions two reasons, one revolving around the assistance husband and wife give each other as they live the lives God gives them to live, and the other revolving around the children the Lord God may entrust to the couple. These two purposes give material for the next two chapters.

Concerning the first purpose of marriage, the *Form* says the following:

The Purpose of Marriage

"First, husband and wife shall live together in sincere love and holiness, helping each other faithfully in all things that belong to this life and the life to come."

First Purpose

Much of what the *Form* says about the first purpose of marriage has been addressed in previous chapters. We've spoken already of the specific task of the husband in relation to his wife (chapter 7), and of the wife in relation to her husband (chapter 8). We've spoken too of the triangle of marriage (chapter 9) and hence about communication between husband and wife and their joint dependence on the Lord God. As we covered those topics, we've unpacked much of what is caught in the phrase *"helping each other faithfully in all things that belong to this life and the life to come."* We learned that God Himself was not satisfied with the man-by-himself, and so created the woman for the man. A marriage, then, does not attain its purpose if husband and wife live together as two disconnected individuals under one roof. There must be an active *"helping each other"* – and that in turn requires the communication discussed in chapter 9, and the ongoing prayer and effort discussed in chapter 10.

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**A MARRIAGE DOES NOT ATTAIN ITS PURPOSE IF
HUSBAND AND WIFE LIVE TOGETHER AS TWO
DISCONNECTED INDIVIDUALS UNDER ONE ROOF.**

Though a later chapter will focus specifically on procreation, it should also be said at this point that the presence or absence of children does not determine whether a marriage is complete. The first purpose of marriage as the Form expresses it is that the wife is there for her husband, and the husband is there for his wife in any and every question pertaining to this life and the life to come. With the couple being for each other the spouse God wants them to be, a marriage is very complete without children. The Form itself makes this point in a striking way inasmuch as the vows the bridegroom and the bride give each other make no mention of children.

Living Together

Just what, though, does *living together* look like? How can one “*live together*” in such a way as to be able to “*help each other faithfully in all things that belong to this life and the life to come*”?

The Lord God created the human being as more than body, and more also than mind, and more too than soul. The human being is not a collection of separate parts either, is not body plus mind plus soul – as if matters of the body do not affect the mind, and matters of the mind do not affect the soul, etc. Rather, the Lord God made a human being as a complete person with each part of his being (be it body or soul or spirit or mind) inseparably connected (indeed, *interconnected*) with all other parts of his being. When Adam first saw the woman God created for him, he was so deeply enthused within himself that he broke out into song: “*This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman’, for she was taken out of man*” (Genesis 2:23). He extolled a unity between the two of them, a unity that reached deep inside their respective beings, a unity that was not limited to something so external as flesh or body, for he dared to call her ‘woman’ on grounds that “*she was taken out of man*”. He recognized that between the two of them there was a unity of flesh and a unity of psyche, indeed, a unity of being – and therefore of purpose and of thought and of desire.

The Holy Spirit placed His stamp of approval on Adam’s song-of-unity when He added in the following verse, “*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh*” (Genesis 2:24). The ‘one flesh’ the Spirit speaks of refers to the full unity of being between man and wife, so that the two are no longer two separate in-

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dividuals, but are actually one entity. This unity of being receives expression in sexual intimacy, that act of love where heart touches heart in a manner no words can fully describe.

The reference in the Form to *living together* is more than cohabitation. For the husband and wife *"to help each other faithfully in all things that belong to this life and the life to come,"* they need to be one in every sense of their being – and express that unity in the mysterious intimacy of sexual love. This is the material we need to explore in this chapter.

Some History

In his letter to Timothy, the apostle Paul foretold that marriage (and hence the sexuality that comes with marriage) would be belittled. He writes as follows,

"The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer" (1 Timothy 4:1-5).

The phrase *"in later times"* describes the totality of the New Testament dispensation, from Paul's times through to today and beyond until Christ returns. Throughout the ages there would, said Paul under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, be those who forbid marriage – and in so doing degrade the love that receives expression in sexual intimacy.

In fact, in Paul's own time there were those who bought into the dualism of earlier Greek philosophy. This dualism exalted the human soul as the real You, whereas the human body was but a prison in which You were trapped for the duration of your earthly sojourn. The urges and desires of the human body (including love and sexuality) were earthy and inferior. This division of the human into a superior and an inferior part led on the one hand to the position that all urges of the body were seen as second-rate and so denounced, and on the other hand to the position that urges of the body were irrelevant and so could be satisfied at will. In the passage before us Paul hooks onto the former consequence, and foretells that teachers would arise in the church of Jesus Christ who would *"forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods"* – both references to the body and its urges.

In answer to these coming teachers, Paul does not at this point discuss

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how the human being is one complete entity that may not be divided into parts, with no part somehow inferior to another; instead, the apostle reaches back to how God created things. Concerning both marriage and food, Paul says, "*God created [them] to be received with thanksgiving.... For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.*" The reference is to God's work in Genesis 1, where the Holy Spirit tells us that God created mankind "*male and female*" (Genesis 1:27) and declared concerning this part of His handiwork too that "*it was very good*" (Genesis 1:31). The maleness and femaleness of the human race obviously includes sexuality. In fact, that God gave the gift of sexual intimacy to mankind (within marriage) is underscored in the words of Genesis 2:24, where the man leaves father and mother, is united to his wife, "*and they will become one flesh.*" Here is no place for a division of the human being into two parts, with the body somehow inferior to the soul.

Church Fathers

Paul's prophecy came to pass. The body-soul distinction of Greek philosophy influenced the thinking of some notable church fathers. Origen (c. 185-254), for example, considered sexuality and sexual desire so earthy and evil that he castrated himself. Augustine (c. 354-430) had in his youth lived a highly immoral lifestyle, but when he came to faith and received a position of leadership in the churches he taught that sexuality had a place only for procreation. Jerome (c. 347-420), the man who translated the Bible into Latin (the Vulgate), would throw himself onto thorns in order to tear his thoughts away from matters sexual.

Given the influence of such leaders, it is not so surprising to learn that the church in due time exalted celibacy. Young men who entered the priesthood were not to marry, and those who entered the monastery were not to marry either. In fact, authorities in the Roman Catholic Church in the middle ages forbade sex on Thursdays because on that day Christ was arrested, on Fridays because then He died, on Saturdays in honor of the virgin Mary, on Sundays in honor of departed saints, on this feast day and that feast day also because..., and all of it communicated the message that sexual intimacy was unclean and not really befitting the Christian. In fact, the only purpose for sexual relations was begetting children.

A change came about at the time of the Great Reformation in the sixteenth century, with its return to Scripture. Luther, for example, though a monk, broke his celibacy vow and married a woman who had spent years in a nunnery. In his table talks, Luther extolled the pleasures of married life and echoed language about marriage (including its intimate aspects) as found in Scripture. The Reformers' refusal to see sexuality as unclean did not, however,

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prevent the reappearance of that perception in later years. The Victorian era of English (and American) history made decent conversation about matters of sexuality virtually impossible. Those who fell into the sin of adultery were marked for life. The churches required that their transgression result in public repentance – while sins of blasphemy or deceit did not merit a similar consequence. The signal was clear: sexual feelings and sexual activity were somehow unclean.

Today

The sexual revolution beginning in the 1960's was in some way a reaction to this repressive approach to sexuality. It needs to be granted that there was place for correction. But the correction has gone to the other extreme, so that today there is no place left for the mystique of sexual intimacy. If sending the signal that there was something sinful about sexuality was damaging and unbiblical, the opposite signal (that sexuality is simply a function of nature as normal as sneezing) is equally damaging and unbiblical. That which God has made so wonderful and enriching is in our time made so cheap and common. No couple can *"live together in sincere love and holiness"* if they do not appreciate what the Lord has actually given in His heavenly gift of sexual intimacy.

**THE CREATOR HAS MADE SOMETHING AMAZINGLY
WONDERFUL IN THE COMING TOGETHER OF MALE
AND FEMALE, HUSBAND AND WIFE.**

Scripture

I mentioned earlier Adam's ecstatic song on seeing the bride God gave him: *"This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh"* (Genesis 2:23). The enthusiasm of that song received an echo when David wrote, *"In the heavens [God] has pitched a tent for the sun, which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion"* (Psalm 19:4,5). The sun is bright and radiant – and so is the bridegroom as he leaves his bedroom, his face beaming and alive on account of the pleasure he has experienced with his bride. In another place the psalmist spoke in glowing terms of how the bride goes to her husband. *"The king is enthralled by your beauty.... All glorious is the princess within her chamber; her gown is interwoven with gold...."* and the result will be that *"your sons will take the place of your fathers; you will make them princes throughout the land"* (Psalm 45:11,14,16). Again, the Scripture wonderfully described Isaac's response to receiving a wife. Rebekah *"became his wife, and he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death"* (Genesis 24:67). There was some-

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thing so rich in marriage that it took away the pain of his loss. These and other passages certainly do not describe marriage and the intimacy that comes with it as evil or unbecoming to the child of God. On the contrary, such passages force us to realize that the Creator has made something amazingly wonderful in the coming together of male and female, husband and wife. In fact, this signal comes out very strongly in the Song of Songs.

As the Song is too long to print here, I would urge the reader at this point to take a Bible and read the Song of Solomon in its entirety.

**IN HIS WISDOM AND CARE FOR HIS PEOPLE HE GIVES HIS
OWN A BOOK TO TREASURE AS WE TENDERLY WALK
AMONGST THE BLOSSOMS AND THE THISTLES OF THE
GARDEN OF LOVE ON THIS SIDE OF PARADISE LOST.**

Song of Songs

The topic of the Song is obvious. A (young?) man and a (young?) woman are deeply in love, and enthralled by what they see in each other, enthralled too by the feelings the other awakens in them. One wonders whether a book with this content actually belongs in the Bible?! Suffice it to say that already in the days of the Lord Jesus Christ there simply was no dispute about whether it belonged in the sacred library; it did. So when the apostle Paul wrote that "*all Scripture is God-breathed*" he spoke also of the divine origin of the Song of Songs. And when Paul added that all Scripture "*is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work*" (2 Timothy 3:16), he described the purpose of the Song of Songs also. God Himself has included in the Bible He gave us one book devoted specifically to the love of man and woman.

Yet in the history of interpretation, there has been a great hesitancy to take this book of the Bible at face value. The book could not, it was said (also by Origen; we met him a couple of pages back), be simply about the love and the attractions and the tensions between two people, for (he said) that's much too earthy for a book as spiritual as the Bible. The Song must instead be an allegory on the relation between Christ and the church. So the references in the book to various parts of the human body were spiritualized, and the Song's ability to speak to couples about matters of sexual intimacy was silenced. Even today there are commentaries aplenty that promote this 'spiritualized' reading of the Song of Songs.

However, with this 'spiritualized' reading we are back in the dualism of the Greeks wherein the body and its urges was seen as earthy and inferior to

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the soul. The Song itself gives no indication at all that the Lord would have us understand it in any way other than its obvious reading, namely, as a song about romance and love and deep awareness of each other's bodies. On top of that, all who are honest with their own feelings and struggles, and certainly those who have been (and are still) in love, recognize the accuracy of what is recorded in this Song. This Song puts into words, be it in the poetry typical of romance, the struggles and feelings of any couple in love; this is real life! And why should real life, described in real language, not have a place in the Word of God? Is Jesus Christ not Lord of every square inch of life – including the bedroom, and the struggles a courting couple face as they walk together through the bush? Or might the psalmist's inspired words not be true after all, when he declares that *"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path"* (Psalm 119:105) – including the path a young man walks with a maiden?

As it is, the Lord God, in His care for His people, has given us in the Bible one book that unmistakably addresses the very deep emotions love awakens. The human being God created is one complete entity, comprising body and soul and spirit and heart and mind and feelings and so much more. Love reaches into the deepest recesses of one's personhood, and affects the mind as it searches for ways to verbalize this love; it affects the body as it responds to scintillation and aromas of love; it affects the psyche so that one becomes lovesick; it affects the spirit so that one is restless in bed at night – and all of that is a wonderful display of God's creative imagination and power. In His wisdom and care for His people He gives His own a book to treasure as we tenderly walk amongst the blossoms and the thistles of the garden of love on this side of Paradise lost. If husband and wife are to *"live together in sincere love and holiness"*, this is a book they shall need to read again and again, and understand as far as is humanly possible.

Personhood

The two lovers in this Song of Songs do not hesitate to express their exuberance about the other person. The (young) man in the relationship waxes poetic as only a man in love can do:

"How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful! Your eyes behind your veil are doves. Your hair is like a flock of goats descending from Mount Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn, coming up from the washing. Each has its twin; not one of them is alone. Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon; your mouth is lovely. Your temples behind your veil are like the halves of a pomegranate. Your neck is like the tower of David, built with elegance; on it hang a thousand shields, all of them shields of warriors. Your two breasts are like two fawns, like twin fawns of a gazelle that browse among the lilies" (4:1-5).

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Actually, a girl in love can say the same kinds of things about her beloved:

"My lover is radiant and ruddy, outstanding among ten thousand. His head is purest gold; his hair is wavy and black as a raven. His eyes are like doves by the water streams, washed in milk, mounted like jewels. His cheeks are like beds of spice yielding perfume. His lips are like lilies dripping with myrrh. His arms are rods of gold set with chrysolite. His body is like polished ivory decorated with sapphires. His legs are pillars of marble set on bases of pure gold. His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as its cedars. His mouth is sweetness itself; he is altogether lovely. This is my lover, this my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem" (5:10-16).

**BOTH LOVERS ARE USING THE VARIOUS PARTS OF
THE VISIBLE ANATOMY TO DESCRIBE THE INNER
PERSON MANIFESTED BY THE OUTER LOOK.**

It is striking that both parties in this relationship admire each other's bodies as they do. From nature around them as they see it daily, they find comparisons fitting to the part of the anatomy that catches their delight. Yet the reason for the admiration is not sexually motivated, for notice that particular parts of the anatomy are not mentioned. It is that which one sees, also through the outline of clothing, that receives the comment. What was there about the eyes, the lips, the neck, the breasts, the arms that prompted this attention and praise? Are we to understand that these two lovers had perfect bodies, high muscle tone, no fat? There is no such indication in the text. And why are the comparisons as they are?

Both lovers are using the various parts of the visible anatomy to describe the inner person manifested by the outer look. The way her hair is cut and combed, the set of her lips, the way she holds her head, how she dresses herself, etc, are all indicative of her character, her personhood. The apostle Peter tells the wives among his addressees that *"your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit"* (1 Peter 3:3,4). It is this inner beauty that these two lovers see in each other, and they find the expression of this inner beauty through its outward manifestation.

There is no surprise in this. The human being God created is a complete unity, consisting inseparably of heart and soul and spirit and mind and body and so much more. To focus on the body as an object of entertainment or self-

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satisfaction does distinct injustice to the way the Creator has fashioned the human race, for it tears body from soul (as those who suffer sexual abuse learn so painfully). Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, these two lovers know they cannot divide the object of their love into parts so as to focus on the outward and ignore the inner. They recognize that the personhood of their loved one, the self-in-totality, comes out in what the eye sees. So there is respect for the other's personhood, and therefore delight in the other's body as revelation of the jewel the lover sees deep inside.

There is a vital lesson caught in this element of the Song. A couple will not long "*live together in sincere love and holiness*" if their delight in the other is focused on the body-as-body. The beauty of the body lies in the fact that it gives expression to what's deep inside, that special something that makes the other so adorable. In today's society, a body-for-satisfaction is easy to obtain. But to win a heart, and to keep that heart yours-in-love, is an altogether other challenge. It requires focusing on what's inside the other, his or her true personhood. Once the heart is found to be beautiful and enchanting, the beauty of the body (eyes, hair, neck, breasts) will be enthralling, even if that body will never make it the center-fold of a questionable magazine. And delighting in the beauty of the heart leads in turn to sexual intimacy being so pleasurable and fulfilling.

Lasting

The attentive reader will have noticed that I have refrained from commenting on whether or not the couple in the Song of Songs are still courting or are already married. Commentators are divided on this question, with defensible arguments supporting both points of view. For the purposes of this publication, it is sufficient to note that the delight expressed in the Song by the two lovers is not meant to be fleeting, as if the romance of courtship and the delight of newlyweds may legitimately evaporate in the course of time. God's intent was that the exuberance Adam felt and expressed upon receiving his wife was to last not a month or a year, but forever. The fall into sin, though, warped so very much. Even Adam's delight in Eve disappeared as he pointed a finger of blame at her. Yet because of the atoning work of Jesus Christ, God in the Holy Spirit has come to make His home in human hearts – and so make it possible again for "*husband and wife to live together in sincere love and holiness,*" not just for the short term but for as long as both shall live. In other words, the exuberance for the other –the whole person, in every facet– can remain. More, it not only *can* remain, but *must* remain.

Solomon, when he warned his sons concerning the adulteress, did more than tell them to stay away from her. Together with his warning he set the encouragement to delight in the wife God gave, and to do so not only when one is twenty or thirty, but to keep on doing so even into old age. Says he,

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"May you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer – may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love" (Proverbs 5:18,19). The word translated here as 'captivated' catches the notion of being ravished, overwhelmed, exhilarated by her love. Through Solomon the Holy Spirit makes clear that this exhilaration was not to thrill the hearts of Solomon's boys only during a honeymoon, but was to continue *"always"*.

Similarly, when Solomon discusses in the book of Ecclesiastes how one is to live in a broken world outside of the perfection of Paradise, he not only instructs Israel to leave the repair of Paradise for God to bring about, but adds that in the meantime one is to enjoy the life God gives. He says,

"Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do. Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 9:7-9).

Notice how Solomon encourages pleasure in marriage, and how one is to do that *"all the days"* God gives. That husband and wife *"live together in sincere love"* is not to be limited to the early part of one's married life, nor is the love to become shallow or even platonic with the passing of years, but the love is to remain pleasurable, romantic, intimate.

Jesus Christ

Given how the Lord God in the Old Testament has instructed His people to delight in marriage and enjoy each other intimately, it is really no surprise that our Lord Jesus Christ performed His first miracle at a wedding feast (John 2:1-11). The fall into sin had ruined so much, damaging too God's wonderful gift of intimate love. But our Lord came to earth to restore what we had broken, and His work of restoration includes also marriage and the intimacy that belongs with two people whom God makes one. So the fruit of the Spirit includes *"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control"* (Galatians 5:22,23), and it is the exercising of precisely these gifts that draws the heart of the other ever closer to your own and your own to hers. And that closeness in turn produces the lyrical language of the Song of Songs not only in those who court, but also in those married for many years. In this way *"the marriage bed"* is *"kept pure"* (Hebrews 13:4).

Is it then insignificant that the Lord Jesus Christ can have the pleasures of the Last Day described in terms of a wedding feast? John hears a mighty voice, *"Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and His bride has*

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made herself ready" (Revelation 19:7). And again: "*Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!*" (Revelation 19:9). What's so exciting about the wedding supper is not just the food and the partying, but the intimate pleasures of love that follow. The radiant bridegroom of Psalm 19 captured something of that, and so did the couple of the Song of Songs. The pleasure of intimacy, that wonderful gift the Lord gives in marriage, catches in a small way the inexpressible delight of life in the New Jerusalem. It's "*perfect blessedness, such as no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived – a blessedness in which to praise God forever*" (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 22.58). In the enchanting union of man and wife in the mystery of sexual intimacy, there is a small reminder of Paradise lost and a small foretaste of Paradise regained.

**IN THE ENCHANTING UNION OF MAN AND WIFE
IN THE MYSTERY OF SEXUAL INTIMACY, THERE IS A SMALL
REMINDER OF PARADISE LOST AND A SMALL
FORETASTE OF PARADISE REGAINED.**

Today

Parents and children live today in a culture obsessed with sexuality. What God created to be so wonderful, and to be spoken about only with reverence and awe, has been made so common and so shallow – and its mystique is gone and hence its shine also. We're invariably affected by the times in which we live, and our expectations in marriage influenced too by what we see and hear in the media. We do well to realize that the Lord our God, true as He is to His promises, has given our society over "*in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another*" (Romans 1:24). Also in matters of intimacy, it is not for the children of God to take lessons from the ways of the world, let alone to follow them. It is for us instead to keep our Bibles open, so that, whether married or not, we learn and keep learning what wonders God has given to His people in His gift of sexuality. Let husband and wife read and read again the Song of Songs the Holy Spirit has given to us, and keep learning to speak its language-of-love in relation to each other.

Equally, let parents read the Song of Songs at the kitchen table (and other passages of Scripture that speak of sexuality), for the benefit of growing children. Our children receive from the world in which they live a very warped perception of sexuality. When our children in such a context receive amply warnings against unchastity, it is understandable that they conclude that there

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is something negative and unclean about sexuality and their urges. If they enter marriage (or even courtship) with a skewed view of what sexuality is about, they will not be able –unless it is corrected– to enjoy in later life the splendors of this gift as God intended it. Let parents instill in their children (young and not so young) that when God made mankind “*male and female*” (Genesis 1:27) He made something exceptionally wonderful and delightful. More, let parents illustrate to the children in the way they talk to and about each other that they delight in the spouse as much today as they did years ago, and so let their children see before their eyes something of what the Song of Songs wants to communicate.

To help pass on the same message to those around us, we do well also to watch how we speak in our homes and offices and workplaces about the body and about sexuality. This gift is so wonderful that there is no place for vulgar language and demeaning expressions. Paul puts it like this, “*But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving*” (Ephesians 5:3,4).

For the sake of healthy intimacy in our own marriages, for the sake of our children’s sexual health, and for the benefit of the people around us, couples need to understand and model the sense of awe and respect for sexuality that the Holy Spirit has captured in the Song of Songs.

Conclusion

Paul warned Timothy against those who forbid marriage, and in the course of the years so many of such teachers have appeared – as if there is something unholy and unclean with sexual intimacy. On the other hand there are those who make an idol out of sex, as if bodily satisfaction is everything. Paul would have us know that “*everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer*” (1 Timothy 4:4,5). With those words the apostle brings us back to the triangle of marriage, where the husband and the wife form the two base points and God the apex – and the strength of the bond between the husband and wife is not any horizontal chemistry between the two, but their respective vertical bonds with God. Understanding sexuality is very much a matter of learning from an open Bible, and practicing sexual intimacy is very much a matter of prayer. May the Lord God graciously grant that husband and wife, in the midst of the pleasures and struggles of marital intimacy, be people of the Bible and people of prayer – and so a blessing to many around them.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Points for Discussion:

1. Why is the presence or absence of children not essential to a happy marriage?
2. Paul wrote that over the years people would arise who would belittle God's gift of sexual intimacy. What would drive people to do so? Conversely, Paul also mentions that people idolize sexuality. What would drive people to do that?
3. To your mind, is there something unclean or improper about sexual intimacy? Try to lay a finger on why you answer this question the way you do. What will it take to conform your thoughts and feelings on the subject to agree with those of the couple in the Song of Songs?
4. Does your spouse think there is something unclean or improper about sexual intimacy? Try to explain why your spouse feels this way. What will it take to conform his/her thoughts and feelings on the subject to agree with those of the couple in the Song of Songs?
5. In your judgment, is it fitting that the Bible contains a book as the Song of Songs? Is God actually interested in this topic? What is the connection between sin and salvation on the one hand and the topic of this Song on the other?
6. Why are the lovers of the Song of Songs so thrilled by what they see in the other? As the years have gone by, do you remain thrilled with what you see in your spouse? Explain why your answer is as it is. If what you see no longer thrills you, what would the Lord God have you do?
7. We raise our children in a time that lays much emphasis on the body. What penalty does Paul mention in Romans 1:18-32 upon those who emphasize the body? How can we help our children become persons of inner beauty?
8. Why does the Holy Spirit describe the pleasures of the New Jerusalem with language borrowed from marriage (see Revelation 19:7,9)? What does this say about God's approval of sexual intimacy?
9. How does observing pornography (be it alone or with the spouse) affect one's understanding of sexual intimacy? Evaluate whether this is positive or negative. Can you speak to this topic from personal experience?
10. Is sexuality spoken of in honorable terms in your home? Are there influences in your home that undermine respect for this gift?
11. Why has God confined sexual intimacy to within the marriage relationship, and not before or outside of marriage?

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Children in Marriage

In its instruction to the young bridegroom and bride, the Form mentions also the second purpose for marriage. The Form words it like this:

The Purpose of Marriage

"Second, by marriage the human race is to be continued and increased, and, under the blessing of God, husband and wife will be fruitful and multiply. If it pleases God to give them children, they shall nurture these children in the true knowledge and fear of the Lord."

The Duties of Marriage

"Bridegroom, ...work faithfully in your daily calling, that you may support your family....," and, "Bride, ...take proper care of your family and household."

Intercession

"Grant them Your blessing according to the covenant promises given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. If it pleases You to give them children, confirm Your covenant to them and to their seed; and grant that they may nurture these children in the fear of the Lord, to the glory of Your Name, and to the edification of the Church."

This second purpose of marriage as listed in the Form, then, revolves around children. Three questions will need our attention as we consider the place of children in marriage:

- a. Are children a blessing?
- b. Should we limit the number of children we receive, and if so, how?
- c. How do we nurture the children received?

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Are children a blessing?

In the beginning

As the Marriage Form considers the place of children in relation to marriage, the Form reaches back all the way to Genesis 1. That chapter relates that God created the human race *"in His own image"; "male and female He created them"* (Genesis 1:27). The very first instruction Scripture records to mankind is this, *"God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it'"* (Genesis 1:28). The command is straightforward: the two humans God created were commanded to propagate so that the earth be filled with people.

THERE SHOULD NOT BE BUT TWO INDIVIDUALS ON EARTH WHO REFLECT TO CREATION WHAT GOD IS LIKE, BUT AN INNUMERABLE MULTITUDE SPREAD INTO EVERY CORNER OF THE WORLD.

We need to notice that the command to *"be fruitful and increase in number"* does not appear in a void – as if God has no particular reason why Adam and Eve (and their descendents) were to multiply. God had created people *"in His image"*, a reality true not of eagles or elephants. The point of forming a creature *"in His image"* was that the man and the woman on earth might image what God in heaven was like. The Creator, after all, would not live on earth, for He had created heaven to be His dwelling place (Psalm 115:16). Yet the world was created for God's glory, and so there should be on earth some representation of what the Lord was like. This privileged task God entrusted to the human race. Through the way people speak and act, they were to reflect to the rest of creation something of what God was like – His righteousness, His goodness, His care for His creatures, etc. Yet there should not, then, be but two individuals on earth who reflect to creation what God is like, but an innumerable multitude spread into every corner of the world. God, then, commanded the human race to *"be fruitful and increase in number"* so that God would be glorified through innumerable image-bearers filling the earth. More, as these children marry, they were to image in their relation together God's relation with His people.

Fall

Before there was time for Adam and Eve to increase in number, the human race fell into sin, and so earned God's righteous penalty of death. With this fall Adam and Eve (and in them all mankind) lost the ability to image what God was like, and reflected instead what the devil was like.

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In His great compassion the Lord God was pleased to announce the gospel of redemption through Jesus Christ. He did so through His word to the serpent, spoken in the hearing of Adam and Eve. As He spoke that word of redemption, God picked up on the mandate spoken earlier to Adam and Eve to *"be fruitful and increase in number,"* for He told the serpent that He would place *"enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers"* (Genesis 3:15). As children would play a pivotal role in God's battle with the devil, God would see to it that His earlier command to mankind to be fruitful would become reality, despite their fall into sin.

There is, however, development in the reason why the woman would have children. The reference is now not primarily to generating more people who would image God (for people have become sinful, and so can no longer image accurately what God is like), but the purpose for having children zeroes in now on the enmity with the serpent. God has declared a war, and in this war God would bring forth soldiers for the battle through children born to the woman. Yet these children would not be simply victims on a battlefield, for God decreed that the offspring of the woman would crush the head of the serpent. Through children would come the victory! It is as the psalmist put it: *"From the lips of children and infants You have ordained praise because of Your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger"* (Psalm 8:2).

Admittedly, it would all happen through much struggle. The Lord told the woman that He would *"greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children"* (Genesis 3:16). Again, the man is told that God has *"cursed the ground...; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life"* (Genesis 3:17). To bring forth and raise, let alone feed and clothe, warriors for the battle God ordained with the devil would take much pain and anxiety on the part of the older generation. Even so, Adam embraced God's promise in faith, as is evident from the fact that he *"named his wife Eve"* – a word related to the Hebrew word for 'life', *"because she would become the mother of all the living"* (Genesis 3:20). More, Adam and Eve obeyed the command to be fruitful; in the intimacy of love they came together so that Eve became pregnant (Genesis 4:1).

In the years that followed, the human race (believers and unbelievers alike) obeyed the command to *"be fruitful and increase in number."* One generation brought forth another generation (see Genesis 5), and in the process *"men began to increase in number on the earth"* (Genesis 6:1). Yet the increase in numbers did not result in more persons on earth who imaged what God was like, nor were there increasingly more soldiers for God's armies on earth to fight the Evil One; instead, the children born in the days before the flood were God-less and sided with the devil in the great battle. Though God had desired that the human race increase so as to fill the earth, He now determined to

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"wipe mankind ... from the face of the earth" (Genesis 6:7). In the flood God did so, leaving only Noah and his family alive.

Given that the human race was so depraved that God had to destroy it, it is striking that after the flood the Lord very deliberately renewed the command of the beginning. After the Lord God *"smelled the pleasing aroma"* of Noah's sacrifice (Genesis 8:21), a sacrifice that pointed forward to the coming sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as atonement for sin, He *"blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth'"* (Genesis 9:1). Notice: almighty God had the power to bring forth from the stones of the field persons who could image Him well and serve as soldiers in His battle against the Evil One. In His wisdom, however, He did not choose for that option. Instead, the Lord repeated the identical command He had given in Paradise! Though He knew well that *"every inclination of [man's] heart is evil from childhood"* (Genesis 8:21), God yet wanted warriors to appear on earth through the process of childbirth. The human race does not consist of countless unconnected individuals, but is one family, descended of one father and mother. It was the will of God to save this race through the birth of children.

And those children, let it be said again, are to be born within marriage. That's the force of His word in Genesis 2: *"a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh"* (vs 24) – in that order! First there is to be the leaving and the cleaving, and *then* the one-flesh-ness that's necessary for pregnancy and birth. This was the ordinance and plan of God: through the birth of children, His program of redemption on Planet Earth would continue.

Fruitfulness and the Covenant

In His wisdom, the Lord God was pleased to bring about His redeeming work on Earth through one specific nation. He called Abram from Ur and gave him this promise: *"I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you.... All peoples on earth will be blessed through you"* (Genesis 12:2,3). He repeated the promise some time later: *"I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted"* (Genesis 13:16). We recognize in this promise an echo of the command of Genesis 1:28 to *"be fruitful and increase in number."* Yet this time there is no *command*, but a *promise*. The reason for the difference is that Abram and his wife are already too old to be able to carry out the commission to *"be fruitful and increase in number."* More, the Lord God is doing something new. He sets Abram aside to be special to Him, so that the work of redemption God will do through childbearing will be obviously *His* work.

That's how it turns out. God laid His claim of love upon Abram and so established with him His covenant of grace. However, the bond of love God es-

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tablished with Abram was not limited to Abram-the-individual, but included all the children (in the generations) that God would sovereignly entrust to Abram's care. That's the force of the word of God to Abram when He changed his name to Abraham – "*father of many nations*" (Genesis 17:5). Said God, "*I will establish My covenant as an everlasting covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you*" (Genesis 17:7). Abraham and his children, then, would receive a special place in the battle against Satan; God would ensure that the children entrusted to Abraham would be warriors in that cosmic conflict.

**OVER A PERIOD OF SOME 400 YEARS, A CHILDLESS OLD COUPLE
HAD MULTIPLIED – UNDER GOD'S BLESSING – TO A MULTITUDE
MORE NUMEROUS THAN THE STARS ONE CAN COUNT.**

This *promise* to Abraham (and in him to Sarah) did not absolve Abraham of responsibility. Precisely because he received a promise, Abraham had to act in obedience with the promise. The result was that "*Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age*" (Genesis 21:2). With this blessing on their intimacy, the Lord God began to fulfill the promise to Abraham to make him a great nation (Genesis 12:2). This was a pattern God repeated with Isaac (Genesis 26:4) and Jacob (Genesis 28:3,14), and so the point was established that Israel's existence is very much the result of God's mighty work. Yet human responsibility remains reality, and so the Lord repeated to Jacob the identical mandate He had given in Paradise and to Noah after the flood. Said God to Jacob: "*I am God Almighty; be fruitful and increase in number*" (Genesis 35:11). Jacob and his offspring acted in agreement with this command, so that under God's blessing the people of Israel in Egypt "*were fruitful and increased greatly in number*" (Genesis 47:27). In fact, they increased so greatly that they "*became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them*" (Exodus 1:7). Notice how much the choice of terms here reminds of God's initial command in Paradise to "*be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth*" (Genesis 1:28). Despite Pharaoh's efforts to curb their growth, the number of Israelites who left Egypt "*were about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children*" (Exodus 12:37). If there were about 600,000 men, there were at least an equal number of women (see Exodus 1:16), and at a minimum at least twice as many children. A conservative estimate brings us then to at least two and half million Israelites. Over a period of some 400 years, a childless old couple had multiplied, under God's blessing, to a multitude more

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numerous than the stars one can count. God Himself saw to it that the command He had given in the beginning was obeyed, so that in turn there would be on earth a host of people who reflect what He is like and are joined in battle with God against the forces of darkness. The command of the beginning was obviously not limited to the beginning!

Blessing and Curse

The covenant God established with the people of Israel had (as all covenants do) two sides, a promise and an obligation. The promise included blessings on obedience and curses on disobedience. In the wisdom of God, children received a place in both the blessings and the curses. Said God:

"Worship the LORD your God, and His blessing will be on your food and water. I will take away sickness from among you, and none will miscarry or be barren in your land" (Exodus 23:25,26). Elsewhere: "If you follow My decrees and are careful to obey My commands ..., I will look on you with favor and make you fruitful and increase your numbers, and I will keep My covenant with you" (Leviticus 26:3,9). Again: "If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all His commands I give you today..., all these blessing will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God: ... The fruit of your womb will be blessed.... The LORD will grant you abundant prosperity – in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock..." (Deuteronomy 28:1,2,4,11; see Deuteronomy 7:13,14).

On the other hand,

"But if you will not listen to Me and carry out all these commands, and if you reject My decrees and abhor My laws and fail to carry out all My commands and so violate My covenant, then I will do this to you: I will bring upon you sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever that will destroy your sight and drain away your life.... I will send wild animals against you, and they will rob you of your children..." (Leviticus 26:14-16,22). And: "if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all His commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you: ...The fruit of your womb will be cursed.... You will be pledged to be married to a woman, but another will take her and ravish her.... Your sons and daughters will be given to another nation, and you will wear out your eyes watching for them day after day, powerless to lift a hand.... Because of the suffering that your enemy will inflict on you during the siege, you will eat the fruit of the womb, the flesh of the sons and daughters the LORD your God has given you..." (Deuteronomy 28:15,18,30,32,53).

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This two-fold emphasis comes back in the words of the prophets in Israel's later history. In response to the people's sins, the Holy Spirit moves Hosea to say this:

"Hear the word of the LORD, you Israelites...: 'There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgement of God in the land.... Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as My priests; because you have ignored the law of your God, I also will ignore your children. [The people] will eat but not have enough; they will engage in prostitution but not increase, because they have deserted the LORD...." (Hosea 4:1,6,10). "Ephraim's glory will fly away like a bird – no birth, no pregnancy, no conception. Even if they rear children, I will bereave them of every one.... Give them, O LORD – what will You give them? Give them wombs that miscarry and breasts that are dry.... Ephraim is blighted, their root is withered, they yield no fruit. Even if they bear children, I will slay their cherished offspring" (Hosea 9:11-16).

Conversely, when the Lord promises restoration through the atoning work of the coming Mediator, He gave Israel this promise:

"I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring, and My blessing on your descendants. They will spring up like grass in a meadow, like poplar trees by flowing streams" (Isaiah 44:3,4).

The reference to grass speaks here of luxuriant growth, lush in abundance. For God's intent that the earth be filled with persons who image what God is like remains unchanged, as does His purpose to place on earth many warriors to fight the fight of faith.

Privilege of Parenting

All of it together gave to Israel, covenant people as they were, the distinct sense that children were blessings God was graciously pleased to bestow upon His faithful children. They were blessings every bit as much as new birth in the barn was a blessing, and a rich harvest in the field was a blessing. In fact, children were *more* than a blessing to God's covenant people; they were a wonderful heritage, God's children entrusted into the care of Godly parents. The psalmist understood that there was no greater privilege God could entrust to His people on earth than the gift of His children-by-covenant. *"Praise the LORD,"* the psalmist commands. Why? *"He settles the barren woman in her home as a happy mother of children"* (Psalm 113:9). More: *"sons are a heritage from the LORD, children a reward from Him. Like arrows in the hands of a war-*

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rior are sons born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemies in the gate" (Psalm 127:3-5). These children in Israel, covenant children, are warriors God has placed on earth in His battle with the devil, and given that the victory is most certainly for the Lord, the man who has God's children –God's soldiers– entrusted to his care will not be ashamed. On the contrary: *"Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in His ways.... Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your sons will be like olive shoots around your table. Thus is the man blessed who fears the LORD"* (Psalm 128).

Children in the New Testament

No wonder, then, that the Lord Jesus Christ responded as He did when mothers brought children to Him. The children the mothers brought were not little Moabites or little Romans, but (inasmuch as Jesus labored in Israel) these children were covenant infants, persons whom God in His providence had placed on His side in the cosmic struggle against the devil. That mothers in Israel should bring their little covenant children to Jesus, the One whom God had sent to engage Satan head-on and definitively to defeat him on the cross, was distinctly the right thing to do. *"Let the little children come to Me,"* He corrected His disciples, *"and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these"* (Mark 10:14). 'Such as these': the reference is not to children verses adults (as if children belong to the kingdom of God while adults do not), but the reference is to these (half dozen or so) *covenant* children the mothers brought to Jesus, to the Commander God had sent to crush the head of the serpent. So Jesus *"took [these covenant] children in His arms, put His hands on them and blessed them"* (Mark 10:16). What encouragement for mothers to continue to bear children, and raise them as warriors in God's kingdom!

After His triumph on the cross, the ascended Savior poured out His Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost, Peter explained the significance of the Spirit's coming: *"In the last days, God says, I will pour out My Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams"* (Acts 2:17). Even the little ones of Israel will receive the Spirit God has poured out, because covenant children belong to Him and they have a function to fulfill in the fight against darkness. They too must image again something of what God is like. God's promise of redemption is not for adults only, nor is it indiscriminately for all children; *"the promise is for you and for **your children** and for all who are far off"* (Acts 2:39). It is in the New Testament as it was in the old: the children God entrusts to believing parents are not like the children given to the unbelieving neighbor, for these children belong to Him (see 1 Corinthians 7:14) – and that's why He ensures that these covenant children receive believing parents.

**THE CHILDREN GOD ENTRUSTS TO BELIEVING PARENTS
ARE NOT LIKE THE CHILDREN GIVEN TO THE UNBELIEVING
NEIGHBOR, FOR THESE CHILDREN BELONG TO HIM.**

Receive Children Eagerly

Shall believing parents, then, receive children grudgingly?? Surely, there is no task in God's kingdom more privileged than being entrusted with the care of God's little children-by-covenant! The words of Psalm 127 remain so true: *"Sons are a heritage from the LORD, children a reward from Him"* (vs 3). In fact, it's this perspective that drives Paul to write his instruction to Timothy. *"It was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner,"* wrote Paul, *"but women will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety"* (1 Timothy 2:14,15). No, this is not a theology of salvation-through-works, specifically through the work of childbearing. Rather, Paul is hooking onto the Lord's word directly after the fall into sin, when He said that the offspring of the woman would destroy the offspring of the serpent (Genesis 3:15). Salvation would come through the offspring of the woman, and that implies childbearing! In faith countless women of the Old Testament gave birth to children as they traveled through the various stages of redemptive history, and in so doing they worked toward the coming of the Savior of the world, the Son of God born of the woman Mary. These parents-of-faith knew that *"sons are a heritage from the LORD"* (Psalm 127:3), that children were a blessing (Psalm 128). But that's true not just of the Old Testament, and that's why Paul frames his words in 1 Timothy 2:15 in the future tense; *"women will be saved through childbearing."* Therein he states that the woman's 'labor of faith' (I refer to bearing children as an act of faith) did not cease with the coming of Jesus Christ. In the Lord's continuing church-gathering work between His ascension into heaven and His return on the last day, the godly woman still in faith brings forth children – covenant seed who are heirs of the promises of God in Jesus Christ. Through these covenant children first of all (yes, even more than through mission), the Lord builds His church in the world. It is not by accident that the verse directly following Paul's statement about women being saved through bearing children is about office bearers in the church! *"Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task"* (1 Timothy 3:1). Any young man who sets his heart on being an overseer has earlier been born of a woman. More, what prompts a young man to set his heart on being an overseer? Surely, the godliness of his mother, the zeal with which she sets herself to the bearing and rearing of her child(ren) forms an unmistakable encouragement for the offspring to be actively involved in the Savior's church-gathering work. That's to

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say that for the mother (and the father) there is no greater privilege in God's kingdom than to be entrusted with the care of God's little ones – the future of His church.

The command to *"be fruitful and increase in number"* was, then, first given in Paradise and has been repeated over and over again in the years and centuries that followed. Never has the Lord withdrawn this instruction. On the contrary, in the New Testament dispensation parenthood remains so very much a privilege. The word of the Holy Spirit through Paul is telling: *"I counsel younger widows to marry, to **have children**, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander"* (1 Timothy 5:14). That instruction is not culturally conditioned, but Scripturally normative for all times.

Well, then, does the Form remind those who marry today of God's command in Genesis 1, and lay before the young couple the will of the Lord: *"under the blessing of God, husband and wife will be fruitful and multiply."*

Faith

The question now arises whether this position is realistic in today's world. Has that command from Genesis 1:28 to *"be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it"* not been completed? We're told that the earth doesn't have the capacity to handle a larger population; it's full, and suffers the scars of past abuse. Our attention is also directed to the millions who live in extreme poverty, and we're told that our moral obligation is to help the hungry instead of bringing forth more users of earth's limited supplies. We're told too that raising children is extremely costly, and to do a respectable job one cannot in our culture afford more than two children. Further, should both parents not be able to receive the fulfillment of employment? And ought one not, also for the children's sake, to maintain a decent lifestyle – and that requires two incomes? Is it not right and proper to complete your education and do your traveling and bring down the house payments to a doable level before you begin a family? These and so many other arguments pommel the God-fearing couple, and encourage them to think in terms of limiting family size or to delay starting the family.

Faith speaks a different language. Nowhere has the Lord withdrawn the commission of Genesis 1:28; instead, He has in numerous places repeated it. He taught His covenant people in the Old and New Testament to confess that *"sons are a heritage from the LORD, children a reward from Him.... Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them"* (Psalm 127:3,5). Even a child in Israel knew that no soldier worth his salt went into battle with but two arrows or four in his quiver; for the sake of his life he went instead with as many arrows as the commander had available for him. When the Lord declares blessed that man who has his quiver full of children, He tells us that the number of chil-

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dren should not be limited to two or four. Instead, we need to be open to God filling the quiver – and He determines when it's full. Again, if children are a blessing even as crops are a blessing, it is for us to respond to receiving children in the same way as we respond to a good crop – with gratitude. Inasmuch as we do not decline God's other blessings, it will not do to decline this blessing. As to the struggle it takes to bring children into the world, the toil it takes to feed and clothe them, and the energy it takes to raise them, the believer trusts the Lord to supply. If He could create the world out of nothing, if He could supply for more than 2 million Israelites in Goshen and later in the desert, if He could give His only Son to deliver us from Satan's power, He certainly is able to supply today what godly parents need to raise His children to His glory. Receiving children is not first of all a matter of logistics, but is first of all a matter of faith.

It should further be noted how childlessness and bereavement and enemies taking the children away was in the Old Testament God's punishment on covenant disobedience. There was a time not many decades ago that our culture was distinctly Christian; witness the countless church buildings throughout the western world. Yet now in Canada alone more than 100,000 children are killed each year. These abortions undeniably provoke the wrath of the Creator, a wrath that God will demonstrate in His time and manner. At the same time, this lovelessness for children *is itself* a punishment from God on the apostasy of the land. If Christians, now, take onboard the arguments heard in society against having (several) children, or adopt the arguments raised to delay the arrival of children, we are using opinions that have a place in bringing God's judgment over the nation. By using those same arguments, we inadvertently may end up sharing the judgment in our own homes. May God preserve us from that!

What is the alternative? We need to live by faith. That includes that we accept the command God has given about fruitfulness, and accept also His declaration that children are a blessing He bestows upon His people. It includes too that we embrace in faith the reality of God's faithfulness in supplying our homes with the "*daily bread*" (Matthew 6:11) we need to feed, clothe, educate and raise the children God entrusts to us. In a world hostile to God, the task is not easy. But the couple that marries in faith entrusts this problem to God in the conviction that He will provide. God has put us on this earth not for our pleasure, but for His glory.

Family Planning

All that's said above does not mean that there is no room for speaking about family planning. On the contrary, speaking about family planning is imperative. That's true first of all because so much is said about the topic in our

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times. Those who marry are invariably children of their times, and we are simply naïve to think that Christians today never avail themselves of contraceptives in order to delay and/or limit their children.

The second reason that family planning needs to be discussed is that the Lord God definitely does address this issue. He did not create humans to act thoughtlessly in any area of life, and that includes all that comes with the intimacy of marriage. On the contrary, it is part and parcel of our being created in His image that we can plan and think, and so make decisions driven by kindness, goodness, self-emptying, etc – and so reflect something of what God is like. This has implications also in relation to childbearing.

Contraceptives

Perhaps the most common of contraceptives is the Pill. I am not a doctor, and so do not write from a position of expertise on this topic. Yet information is readily available that argues strongly against the use of the Pill. The arguments against its use relate to how the Pill works as well as to its side effects, both medical and marital.

The Pill works by either 1) preventing ovulation, 2) preventing the sperm from reaching the egg, or 3) preventing (if the first two fail so that the woman conceives) the tiny baby from attaching to the lining of the uterus so that in turn the baby dies. The latter, of course, is abortion, and the possibility that abortion is involved makes the use of the Pill impossible for those who take seriously God's command not to murder (Exodus 20:13).

The medical side effects of the Pill are multiple, including suppression of the immune system, depression, inability to conceive once the Pill's use is ended, and greatly increased risk of developing breast or cervical cancer. Given that the Lord would have us look well after our bodies (temples of the Holy Spirit as they are), such side effects also argue strongly against the use of the Pill. Those who prefer to use the Pill are urged to avail themselves of the information readily available on the topic in the public domain. Since the Pill is publicly encouraged and easily used even while public knowledge of its medical side effects is suppressed, I consider this specific warning against its use to be in place.

Other contraceptives are also readily available, though not as easily used, and not as medically dangerous. In my judgment the marital problems coming from the use of contraceptives are, taken on the whole, even more damaging than the medical problems.

The Lord God has ordained that sexual intimacy receive a place within holy wedlock. More, He has given the gift of intimacy as a means of communication, of giving oneself to the other in love. God did not intend sexual intimacy to be an expression of lust or fulfilling the self, but of self-emptying for

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the benefit of the other. Furthermore, the Lord has laid a direct link between this intimate expression of love and His blessing of children. For the godly couple, this link to the blessing of children adds its own special luster to the moments of intimacy.

THE MARITAL PROBLEMS COMING FROM THE USE OF CONTRACEPTIVES ARE, TAKEN ON THE WHOLE, EVEN MORE DAMAGING THAN THE MEDICAL PROBLEMS.

In the world God created, the Lord also placed the possibility of contraceptives. In His providence, He has let these contraceptives be discovered and made readily available in our scientifically advanced times. Scripture says that *"everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer"* (1 Timothy 4:4,5), and that includes contraceptives. However, we need to be keenly aware that the Lord God uses the contraceptives so readily available in our society as a means to bring His curse of *"no birth, no pregnancy, no conception"* (Hosea 9:11) upon our godless society. This observation in itself needs to ring warning bells in relation to the Christian using the contraceptives God makes available. Does a (young) couple do well to break the link God has placed between intimacy and pregnancy? Is that an action of faith or an action of selfishness? At the end of the day this is a spiritual question. If this question is answered unspiritually, the impact on the marriage relation will invariably be negative. Conversely, where this question is answered in a Scripturally pleasing manner, the impact on the marriage will be positive.

Openness

To be granted the privilege of parenting another of God's covenant children is an enormous blessing. Their identity as children of God dictates that these children are entrusted into homes that reflect what God is like. God has shown us what love is, in that He gave up His only Son for the salvation of the undeserving (1 John 4:9,10). Similarly, the Son of God on earth *"did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many"* (Matthew 20:28). This same attitude needs to characterize the atmosphere of the home in which the Lord places His covenant children. And that's to say that parents of such a covenant child are to have their actions and attitude driven not by the sinful nature but by the Holy Spirit – so that they bring forth the fruits of the Spirit in every part of their lives. Sexual intimacy, too, needs to be driven by faith, and hence be characterized by love for the other, kindness, patience,

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gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22,23). Separating the link between intimacy and potential pregnancy removes one mechanism the Lord has created to promote kindness and patience and self-control in marriage.

In love for his wife, the eager husband (for the responsibility is ultimately his; he's the head) may need to deny himself precisely because it is not wise to make his wife pregnant at this time, or even give her cause to fear pregnancy. I use the phrase 'at this time' deliberately, because the Lord God has created the woman in such a way that there is normally a window for potential pregnancy once a month. What is irresponsible this month is not necessarily irresponsible next month.

WHAT IS IRRESPONSIBLE THIS MONTH IS NOT NECESSARILY IRRESPONSIBLE NEXT MONTH.

To know whether it is wise to make her pregnant at this time (or give her cause to fear pregnancy) requires conversation between husband and wife. The conversation needs to be about the needs of the existing family and about coping with those needs. The conversation needs to be about trusting in God to supply one's needs, and about whether one is acting responsibly in the specific circumstances in which God places you. The conversation demands that one be open with the other on very personal matters, and each understand the other too. The conversation requires an open Bible and drives the couple to pray for God's guidance and wisdom. It's conversation wherein the husband as head shall have to give wise leadership to his wife as he seeks to care for her well, and conversation wherein the wife shall need to show that she entrusts herself to his care and leadership. I suspect there is no conversation in marriage that brings together so fully all the various aspects of what marriage is about than such a conversation in the bedroom where each carries the other in love. And where the husband (for he is ultimately responsible before God) needs to conclude that it is not wise to give his beloved cause to fear pregnancy at this point in time (on grounds of sickness or exhaustion or emotional stress, etc) he makes his love for her most clear by denying himself. How valuable such action is for the struggling spouse!

Again, the same conversation may have its catalyst not just in the question of whether it is wise now to become pregnant, but can have its catalyst also in the question of how tired one is or in the question of what one has experienced in the course of the day. Let the husband be open with his wife about how the pictures he saw during the day or how the secretary he met has affected him, and how he needs his wife's confirmation. Let the wife be

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open with her husband about her tiredness and her hopes and her frustrations. It is ongoing *talk* that makes the two understand each other and be the “*one flesh*” – oneness in being and heart and spirit – that leads to that communication of love in the mystique of sexual intimacy – be it through giving oneself or through denying oneself. This sort of love and understanding and self-sacrifice in the bedroom resonates through the entire home, and provides a safe haven for the little ones of God’s covenant to live and mature. After all, such self-emptying reflects what God is like.

Natural

In relation to pregnancy, the Lord God has built into His handiwork a means whereby a couple can know whether she is able to conceive or not. Changes occur in the woman’s body at her time of ovulation, and one is able to learn to detect when these changes occur. An international organization called WOOMB (acronym for *World Organization of the Ovulation Method Billings*) runs a website that supplies the necessary information.

The Lord would have a husband and wife be open with each other, helping each other in all things that belong to this life and the life to come (as the Form has it). As the couple considers whether it is responsible to become pregnant tonight, they do well to read the signs of the woman’s body and include the significance of those signs in their activities. Again, sharing and understanding the signs requires conversation – something so imperative for every part of marriage.

On average, a woman has a brief period of fertility once in 28 days. The question whether or not to have another child, then, can be answered each month anew. Instead of making a once-off decision to have no more children (and hence perhaps undergoing surgery to ensure no further pregnancies), a couple does better to confront the question each month anew. This is very much in keeping with Jesus’ instruction in the Sermon on the Mount, where He spoke about the Father’s care for the birds and the flowers, and then added, “*But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own*” (Matthew 6:33,34). If in matters of food and drink we have enough with the concerns of one day, surely the application to pregnancy (given the woman’s monthly cycle) is that each month’s concern is sufficient. One can be tired today, or not have the health (whether physical or mental) for another pregnancy at this point in time, but under God’s blessing that can change next month or next year. Here is where we need to work with the responsibility with which God has created us, both in terms of ensuring that the wife does not become pregnant too quickly as well as in terms of resisting another covenant child unnecessarily.

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Conclusion

The Lord God has revealed that His act of entrusting His children-by-covenant to particular parents is a profound blessing. That reality will prompt the man and woman of faith to act responsibly toward the children already received, and ensure that these children are well cared for. This reality will also prompt the man and woman of faith to act responsibly in relation to possible further children – if God would bless with that further gift. Indeed, where the Lord gives the energy and opportunity, the Christian couple may look forward with eagerness to the privilege of another child, and act accordingly in the intimacy of marriage. Irrespective of how many children God in wisdom and mercy may give, the God-fearing couple will generate in their home an atmosphere where the fruits of the Spirit obviously abound. And the God-fearing couple is well aware that the presence of those fruits in the bedroom will spill over into the living room of the family.

Nurturing the Children

With the topic of nurturing the children God in His wisdom entrusts to a man and his wife, we move somewhat away from the heart of the subject of marriage. A discussion on the *Form for the Baptism of Infants* would be the ideal forum to discuss this matter in more detail.

Even so, the Marriage Form ascribes the task of parenting to both the bridegroom and the bride with these words: *"If it pleases God to give them children, they shall nurture these children in the true knowledge and fear of the Lord."*

That the mother has a task in nurturing her children is evident from God's word in Genesis 3. It is the woman who will bring forth the children (vs 15), and so be *"the mother of all the living"* (vs 20). It is self-evident that she is not to discard the child she bears, but to nurture it in every sense of the word. So the instruction of God to Israel applies specifically to the mother: *"These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up"* (Deuteronomy 6:6,7). The apostle would have *"the younger women to love their husbands and children..., to be busy at home..., so that no one will malign the word of God"* (Titus 2:3-5). In the nature of the case, training God's covenant children cannot be given to those who do not know God. Instead, it is full-time work for the Christian mother.

The matter is equally true for the Christian father. While it is the mother who bears the children, this mother has been earlier joined to a man as his helper. This man has been made her head, and is (by God's intent) the father of the child she bears. *He*, then, is ultimately responsible also for the

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child and its nurturing. So the Lord God could say of Abraham that *"he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD"* (Genesis 18:19). God held not Sarah but Abraham primarily responsible for the child's instruction! That is why the instruction of Deuteronomy 6 as quoted above applies just as much to the father; he too is to *"impress [God's commands] on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up"* (vs 6,7). And Asaph can promise to pass on *"what our fathers have told us"* (Psalm 78:3). The Holy Spirit has Paul instruct *"fathers ... not [to] exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord"* (Ephesians 6:4). The father's task in nurturing the children goes far beyond the financial; he first of all is responsible for showing God's little ones through word and deed what their Father in heaven is really like. It is a matter that requires the full attention of the conscientious Christian father.

Father and mother cannot work in isolation from each other. God has made the two into *"one flesh,"* that wonderful unity of being and of mind and of spirit and of body. As they bring forth the fruit of the Spirit in their relation together, they shall also consult much with each other about how the children are doing in the service of the Lord, and what specific instruction and guidance the little ones (or not so little anymore!) now need. This nurturing of the children enriches the marriage, compels the Godly couple to converse together more than ever, and drives them repeatedly to God's throne of grace in prayer. Under the blessing of the Lord, they shall experience in their relation together how much children really are a *blessing*.

Those who would marry, then, need to know well what privileged responsibilities God in His wisdom may shortly lay on their path. The wife you choose needs to be more than one you can love; she needs also to have the (spiritual) wherewithal to be mother of your children – and in that capacity your helper. Equally, the husband you choose needs to be more than a keen businessman or a dashing athlete; he needs to have primarily the spiritual maturity to be a fitting father to the covenant children you may bring into the world, and so be leader in the family. The reality of parenting impacts on what kind of person you choose to marry!

Points for Discussion:

1. How many children would you like to receive in your family? At what intervals would you like to see them spaced? When do you intend to begin your family?
 - a. For each of these questions explain why you answer as you do.
 - b. How would your fiancé(e) answer these questions?

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2. Why had God commanded the human race to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:28)? Did the fall into sin change this command?
3. At what point can we as human race claim that we have fulfilled this command? At what point can we as a married couple claim that we have fulfilled this command?
4. Why would God have children be conceived and born within holy wedlock?
5. Explain the link God placed in Israel between covenant obedience and fertility on the one hand, and between covenant disobedience and childlessness on the other. Is North America's birthrate today indicative of God's blessing on the land or of His displeasure? Explain your answer.
6. Are the families of your church as large today as they were 30 years ago? Why might that be? Is that a good thing or not? Should one consider repentance on this subject?
7. Is the gift of many children indicative of God's special pleasure upon a Christian couple, and childlessness indicative of God's displeasure on a couple? Explain your answer.
8. Why could the psalmist be so positive about receiving children? Why does he call them a 'blessing' and a 'heritage'? What does this say to us about receiving children?
9. Ought a Godly Christian couple to speak about family planning? Why or why not?
10. Ought a Christian couple to use contraceptives? Debate your answer using arguments taken from
 - a. Medical risks
 - b. Marital risks
11. How is Jesus' word in Matthew 6:33,34 a fitting instruction in relation to family planning?
12. Are you pleased to have the person you are marrying as father or mother of your children? Are there things that need to be talked about here before you marry?

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Dependence in Marriage

We have now worked our way through the various topics relating to marriage as mentioned in the Marriage Form. As the Form draws to a close, it brings up yet four matters for the encouragement and instruction of the marrying couple. Each of these four drive home the *dependence* of the bridal couple on the Lord God. In doing so, the Form stresses again how much the Lord God is part and parcel of marriage.

The Marriage Vow

The celebrant asks the bridegroom and the bride a series of questions. To the groom he says:

"_____, do you declare here before the Lord and these witnesses that you take as your lawful wife _____, here present? Do you promise to love and guide her faithfully, to maintain her, and to live with her in holiness, according to the holy Gospel? Do you also promise never to forsake her, but to be true to her always, in good days and bad, in riches and poverty, in health and sickness, for as long as you both shall live? What is your answer?"

With his hand firmly in her hand, the bridegroom replies, *"I do."*

To the bride the celebrant says:

"_____, do you declare here before the Lord and these witnesses that you take as your lawful husband _____, here present? Do you promise to love and obey him, to assist him, and to live with him in holiness, according to the holy Gospel? Do you also promise never to forsake

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*him, but to be true to him always, in good days and bad, in riches and poverty, in health and sickness, for as long as you both shall live?
What is your answer?"*

With her hand firmly in his hand, the bride also replies, *"I do."*

Just what is the weight of those two little words, *"I do"*? Are they just that: two little words, with no more significance than if one were asked whether you cared to have a cup of tea?

It needs to be noted that those two little words are spoken distinctly and explicitly in the presence of holy God. The officiating minister asked both groom and bride in his opening question whether they *"declare here before the Lord"* that they take the other as spouse. Though the word of a Christian is always to be reliable, we understand well that speaking a word consciously in the presence of God has more moral weight than a word on the street. A word spoken in the presence of God has the weight of a vow or an oath. The God in whose presence we speak knows and searches the heart to determine whether we speak truthfully, and He will punish if in fact we speak falsely. As the Lord said to Israel, *"This is what the LORD commands: When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said"* (Numbers 30:1,2). Again: *"If you make a vow to the LORD your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the LORD your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from making a vow, you will not be guilty. Whatever your lips utter you must be sure to do, because you made your vow freely to the LORD your God with your own mouth"* (Deuteronomy 23:21-23; see also *Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord's Day 37.102).

In the vow of marriage, bridegroom and bride pledge before God to be for each other the spouse God wants them to be, irrespective of good weather or bad. They consciously speak in God's presence, and so are bound to fulfill their promise. There is simply no place for backing out without bringing upon oneself the judgment of God.

Yet the oath-before-God is more than a commitment to be the spouse God wants you to be. For the same God who holds sinners to the vows they make in His presence also gives these sinners the wherewithal to fulfill the vow. The Lord has poured out His Holy Spirit upon His people, and in the Spirit enables His people to image again what God is like. As God is faithful to the words He spoke, so His people can again be faithful to the words they speak. David had asked, *"LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill?"* (Psalm 15:1). To put the question in New Testament terms: who may enter the New Jerusalem? David's inspired answer was: *"He whose walk*

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is blameless and who ... speaks the truth from his heart..., who keeps his oath even when it hurts" (Psalm 15:2,4). Salvation, however, is not by works but by the grace of God – and God's grace is so complete that those washed by Jesus' blood are also renewed by Jesus' Spirit, so renewed that one *"keeps his oath even when it hurts."*

**IN THE VOW OF MARRIAGE, BRIDEGROOM AND
BRIDE PLEDGE BEFORE GOD TO BE FOR EACH
OTHER THE SPOUSE GOD WANTS THEM TO BE,
IRRESPECTIVE OF GOOD WEATHER OR BAD.**

The Form had earlier reminded the marrying couple that they would face many troubles in the married state and so experience difficulties and afflictions. Yet, the Form had assured them, *"they may also believe the promise of God that they, as heirs of the grace of life, will always receive His aid and protection, even when they least expect it."* When they now say their *"I do"* in the presence of God, they do not vow to stand tall and faithful on own strength in the storms of married life, but they express their conviction that the God who united them in holy wedlock will supply the strength they need. Their vow is not so much a promise of what they will themselves do, as a confession of dependence on the God who brought them together. *In His strength* they will be true to each other for as long as they both shall live.

The Pronouncement

After the bridegroom and bride have voiced their respective vow to God concerning each other, the officiating minister utters these words:

"I now pronounce you husband and wife. The Father of all mercies, who by His grace called you to this holy state of marriage, bind you together in true love and faithfulness, and grant you His blessing. Amen."

By the law of the land, the government entitles the minister to make this pronouncement. At the end of the day, though, this pronouncement from the officiating minister is more than a statement concerning a new legal reality (the two are now officially Mr. and Mrs.) recognized in the capital cities of the nation. Instead, the minister's pronouncement is a proclamation from God. The Form had earlier said that *"we ... believe that the LORD also today gives husband and wife to one another."* In His providence the Lord has led the lives of this young man and this young woman in such a way that they should meet,

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learn to love, and now voice before God their oath of commitment to each other. In the ceremony of marriage the Lord Himself now joins the two in holy matrimony. From this point on the two are *"one flesh"* before God, one in being, one in purpose, one in spirit.

For the young couple this pronouncement-from-God through the mouth of the officiating minister is a source of enormous encouragement. For if it was the Lord who brought the two together, will He not continue to guide and uphold them in time to come? Paul was confident: *"He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 1:6). The young couple may be equally confident of the Lord's unchanging faithfulness. That is why the minister in turn can follow his pronouncement with those encouraging words: *"The Father of all mercies, who by His grace called you to this holy state of marriage, bind you together in true love and faithfulness, and grant you His blessing."* He is faithful, and so will preserve the couple *"in good days and bad, in riches and poverty, in health and sickness, for as long as [they] both shall live."*

We understand: God relates to His people according to the structure of the covenant. He promises much, but also gives His people obligations. The young couple shall not experience that God binds them together in true love and faithfulness if they insist on living in disobedience and unbelief. Here we are back at the triangle of marriage discussed in an earlier chapter; the strength of the bond between bridegroom and bride does not depend on their feelings for each other, but depends ultimately on their relation to the Lord. Those who love, trust and obey Him will experience His care and blessings in marriage too.

Kneeling and Prayer

With the ceremony nearing its completion, the minister verbalizes how dependent every marrying couple is on the Lord God.

"Bridegroom and bride, since we cannot expect anything from ourselves, you shall kneel before the Lord and we shall pray with you and for you that He may enable you to fulfill your vows and grant you His blessing."

That the bridegroom and bride now kneel is not simply quaint ceremony, but is rather confession of humility and dependence. The captain of fifty mandated to arrest Elijah *"fell on his knees before Elijah. 'Man of God,' he begged, 'please have respect for my life and the lives of these fifty men, your servants!'"* (2 Kings 1:13). His action was a picture of personal smallness before the great Man of God. Similarly, the father of a demon-possessed boy *"approached Jesus and knelt before Him. 'Lord, have mercy on my son,' he said"*

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(Matthew 17:14). His kneeling too conveyed homage, a recognition of the Lord's greatness in the face of own dependence. So, when Daniel was thrown into the lions' den on account of Darius' foolish law, he *"got down on his knees and prayed..."* (Daniel 6:10). Again, when Dorcas died Peter *"got down on his knees and prayed,"* and then instructed her to arise from the dead (Acts 9:40). Both Daniel and Peter acknowledged their dependence on God by a posture of humility.

The newly married couple needs so very much the grace and blessing of almighty God upon their marriage. As they set themselves to pray, they get down on their knees – and therein make confession of their smallness before God and their dependence on Him. With their public deed they acknowledge that the God of their marriage is the only One who can hold their marriage together and make them prosper.

Prayer

The prayer that follows has the same message. Its first paragraph consists of praise to the Lord for His gift in this marriage.

"Almighty and heavenly Father, You have said from the beginning that man should not be alone. We thank and praise You that You have given this brother and sister to each other in marriage, that they may be one."

Notice how the almighty power of the Lord receives expression here. The bridegroom and bride may well have been born and raised in total ignorance of each other, even in lands and cultures far removed from each other. But God has *"given this brother and sister to each other in marriage,"* and that's to say that He in His providence sovereignly caused their paths to cross and their hearts to intertwine. This God was at work in the years of their youth, preparing them and leading them to this point in their lives.

Given the power and goodness of the *"almighty and heavenly Father,"* the couple and the congregation now dare to turn to Him with a list of petitions. Through the mouth of the officiating minister, the assembled people join in prayer:

"We pray You, grant them Your Holy Spirit that they may live together according to Your will in true faith. Help them to resist the power of sin, and to live in holiness before You. Lift up Your countenance upon them, and guide them in prosperity and adversity by Your fatherly hand. Grant them Your blessing according to the covenant promises given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. If it should please You to give them children, confirm Your covenant to them and to their seed; and grant that they may nurture these

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children in the fear of the Lord, to the glory of Your Name, and to the edification of the church.

Let them live in communion with Your Son Jesus Christ, in the harmony of true love, and to the benefit of their neighbor. Cause them to look forward with all the church to the great day of the marriage feast of the Lamb."

With these petitions the prayer revisits several of the topics covered earlier in the Form. In prayer the bridegroom and bride, together with family and friends and interested congregation members, lay God's promises concerning marriage before God, and petition Him to act according to His promises. More, in prayer the congregation seeks God's strength and grace so that the newlyweds may be able to carry out the vows they have just voiced. In it all, the congregation and the couple acknowledge their dependence on God. They seek His help precisely because they need it so much – and He has promised it.

We also understand that the attitude expressed in the kneeling and the prayer at the end of the marriage ceremony is not to be limited to the wedding day. Since marriage involves not just two parties but three (the bride and the groom, with God being the center of the marriage) bridegroom and bride shall, as long as the Lord God gives them life, humble themselves together continually before God's throne of grace and implore Him for His aid and blessing. Jesus taught His disciples *"that they should always pray and not give up"* (Luke 18:1), and Paul commanded the saints to *"pray continually"* (1 Thessalonians 5:17). In the face of human weakness and Satan's attacks, this injunction is valid specifically when two sinners become and remain one flesh.

It bears repeating at this point that it is the husband's responsibility first of all as head of his wife (and family, if God will give children) to ensure that dependence on God remains a reality in the home. It is he first of all who must lead his wife in prayer and in Bible reading. Similarly, it bears repeating that it is the wife's responsibility as helper to her husband to ensure that he gives leadership in Bible reading and in prayer. In the busyness of life and the pleasures of marriage, this expression of dependence on God can quickly slip to one side. Yet given God's place in the triangle of marriage, such a development simply may not occur.

To encourage the couple to continue their confession of dependence on God, a consistory traditionally gives the newlyweds a new copy of the Bible. We understand that this gesture has great symbolic significance for the young couple.

Benediction

After prayer the officiating minister lays a blessing upon the newlyweds. The Form specifies the words:

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"Brother and sister _____, our Lord God bless you richly and grant you a long and holy life together in all godliness, love, and unity. Amen."

Given all that has been said before about marriage, be it its institution, be it the triangle of marriage, be it the trouble couples face in this life, it goes without saying that the newlyweds need the blessing of the Lord God so very much. Just what, though, is a blessing actually all about? There are two aspects that need attention.

When the Lord God first created the man and the woman, *"God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number'"* (Genesis 1:28; see also vs 22). God's action of blessing Adam and Eve in this context guaranteed that they received from God the wherewithal to *"be fruitful and increase."* In other words, with the command God gave the empowerment to fulfill the command.

In a fallen world there is a second aspect to note. God's response to Adam's disobedience was that *"the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden"* (Genesis 3:23), away from the place where the Lord used to walk and talk with Adam and his wife. In His great mercy the Lord God established His covenant with Adam's descendants in Israel and condescended to live in their midst in the tabernacle – a restoration-in-principle, we understand, of the communion there used to be in Paradise. In the tabernacle sacrifices were to be offered daily for the people's sins, and so the gospel of redemption through Jesus' blood was impressed on the people. But lest the people think that God was still displeased with them on account of their continuing sins and sinfulness, the Lord God commanded Aaron the priest to lay His blessing on the people time and time again with these words:

"The LORD bless you and keep you;

the LORD make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you;

the LORD turn His face toward you and give you peace" (Numbers 6:22-26).

That God's face shines upon the people is to say that God's face smiles when He looks at His people. Despite their sins there was for Israel not a frown from holy God but the smile of His forgiving grace. Again, that the Lord turns His face towards His people indicates that there is from God no anger against His own; instead of turning His face away from them in anger (and hence in judgment) there was peace for Israel. Of course, the grounds for this harmony between God and Israel is the gospel as proclaimed in the sacrifices happening daily in the tabernacle, where an animal dies in place of the sinner. Through a ritual of the priest's outstretched hands, this favorable disposition of God toward the people was impressed upon them. Given this wealth as caught in the priestly blessing, we can understand well that the pious of Israel delighted to go to the temple of the Lord (Psalm 84, 122). With the blessing of God upon them, the godly could return home confident that the Lord empowered them to carry out the commands He had given them.

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Through His work on the cross of Calvary, our Lord Jesus Christ fulfilled the sacrifices of the Old Testament tabernacle and so reconciled sinners to God. As High Priest of the new covenant it was fitting that He should then also lay the blessing of God upon the people of God. Luke records the event: *"When He had led [His disciples] out to the vicinity of Bethany, He lifted up His hands and blessed them. While He was blessing them, He left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped Him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy"* (Luke 24:50-52). Notice: Jesus' ascension occurred while Jesus was engaged in the act of laying God's blessing on the disciples. That's to say: Jesus' work of blessing His people continues still – and understandably so, for He through His sacrifice has restored His people to God. This blessing of the Lord Jesus Christ continues today in the blessing the minister extends over the people of God at the end of the weekly church services. The content of that blessing remains today the same as it was for Israel long ago: God's smile rests upon His people so that they receive from God the strength they need to carry out the commands of God.

**HERE IS A GLORIOUS SEND-OFF AS THE
NEWLYWEDS EMBARK ON THEIR HONEYMOON,
AND THEN SETTLE TOGETHER INTO THE NEW LIFE
THE LORD HAS GIVEN THEM TOGETHER.**

This glorious blessing, however, is not to be limited to the weekly church services, as if its content were not valid for other times or occasions. The blessing of the ascending Christ extends to God's people in all of life, including marriage. It is fitting, then, that when two children of God are united in holy wedlock *"in the name of the Lord,"* His gracious blessing should be laid on them too. That is what happens in the Benediction at the end of the Form. As this brother and sister embark on the road of married life, with its joys and its sorrows, and its promises and its obligations, they are reminded of the blessing the Lord Jesus Christ has laid on His people of all times and places – and so are reminded that God's favor rests on them. All the promises of the covenant as the Lord has laid them out in Scripture over the centuries are for them also! In the words the officiating minister is to use: *"our Lord God bless you richly and grant you a long and holy life together in all godliness, love, and unity."*

With what confidence may the young bridegroom and bride now face the challenges before them! They acknowledge their dependence on God's grace, and *this favor is assured!* Here is a glorious send-off as the newlyweds embark on their honeymoon, and then settle together into the new life the

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Lord has given them together. All the brokenness of this life is, by God's grace, trumped by the gospel of His mercy in Jesus Christ!

Conclusion

This publication began with a reference to the assault on marriage as we find it in our world today. Let there be no mistake: the institution of marriage is under severe attack from multiple angles.

The child of God, though, need not fear the demise of the holy married state. Man cannot destroy what God has ordained. Though rulers on this earth and persons of influence conspire together against God's ordinance of marriage, the Christian may be confident that the Lord's work continues. Shall young people, sinners both, dare to enter the holy state of marriage? Shall they do so in a climate that's hostile to marriage? Shall they be faithful to each other in every way, and bring forth children in a world that scoffs at such old-fashioned values? In faith the child of God indeed shall proceed into the married state, convinced that the God who created marriage will preserve and strengthen in times of stress. For the child of God believes that the gospel of Jesus Christ overcomes all the brokenness of this fallen life.

Soon the Lord of marriage will return on the clouds of heaven. When He comes, marriage as we know it today will be no more (Matthew 22:30), for man and woman in their relation together will have served their purpose of imaging to other creatures what the God of heaven is really like. God will be in heaven no more, for the dwelling of God will be with people *"and He will live with them"* (Revelation 21:3). No longer will His relationship with people need to be imaged in the relation between man and wife in the holy married state, for every eye *"shall see Him as He is"* (1 John 3:2). Then the *"profound mystery"* of marriage as the relation between *"Christ and the church"* will be revealed in all its luster, for *"the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, [shall come] down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband"* (Revelation 21:2). The relation between God and His people as it was in Paradise shall be restored! The restoration happens through *"Christ"*, and those who are restored include not all people (for some are eternally lost) but only *"the church"*, the assembly of the chosen of God. Then shall the focus of the godly bridegroom and his bride be fulfilled, for they shall stand shoulder-to-shoulder with their gaze fixed eternally on the heavenly bridegroom – and they, with the saints of all ages, shall delight in *"the wedding supper of the Lamb"* (Revelation 19:9).

A Christian marriage, with bridegroom and bride focused together on their God and Savior, experiences so much joy; it's a little foretaste of the pleasures of the eternal marriage of Christ and the church. In His providence the Lord God also gives tears and struggles in marriage, for we still live on this side

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of Paradise regained. The tears and the struggles still characterizing marriage in this broken life prompt us to long earnestly for the great Wedding to come.

"Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20).

Points for Discussion:

1. What difference is there in saying 'I do' deliberately in the presence of God versus saying an 'I do' in a kitchen conversation? What implication follows for marriage?
2. A promise to be faithful to the spouse "for as long as you both shall live" seems so risky, for so much can change in the course of the years. On what grounds can a godly young man or woman dare to make such a vow?
3. The pronouncement declaring a couple to be "husband and wife" comes ultimately from God. What comfort and encouragement do the newlyweds receive from this observation? What obligation follows from this divine pronouncement?
4. What message is conveyed when the marrying couple kneel for prayer? Should this be a once-off posture or should it become a habit in their married life? Explain your answer. Do you and your spouse still daily kneel together before God? Why or why not?
5. Perhaps you received a Bible when you married. Do you make a point of reading your Bible together? Daily or sporadically? Do you speak together about the passage you read? Why or why not? Why is reading the Bible together a good habit?
6. Do you pray together (beside the family prayer at the kitchen table)? If not, why not? If yes, why do you do so? Concerning courting couples: at what point in their relation ought they to begin praying together? Explain your answer.
7. What is the Biblical significance of the blessing? How does the benediction encourage the newly weds? How does the benediction encourage those burdened by years of marriage tension?
8. When Christ returns, marriage will be no more. Do you see that as a negative or as a positive? Explain your answer. Do you look forward to the Marriage Feast of the Lamb? How does this expectation affect your marriage today?