

Taking Marriage Seriously



by Archie Pell



Anglican Agenda Series ♦ J.I. Packer, editor

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Preface To The Series

The Anglican Agenda series of publications aims to open up current questions that call for thought, discussion, prayer and decision among members of the Anglican Church of Canada at this time. The series is sponsored by the Essentials movement, which seeks all-round renewal of life and strength in the Anglican Church, and its writers are Anglican Church personnel speaking out of their loyalty to the Church and their acute sense of its present needs. It is hoped that the series will spark deep personal reflection and group discussion within and between parishes, so that we all may be better prepared for the difficult and demanding era into which, as it seems, our Church is now entering.

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At 7:00 pm sharp a couple arrived at the rector's office door for their appointment to discuss getting married. After the initial greeting the rector asked them a simple question.

"Why do you want to get married?"

After a slight pause they replied, almost in unison, "Because we're in love."

"That's nice," the priest responded. "But what has love got to do with getting married?"

Somewhat confused by this question, the woman blurted out, "But love is what marriage is all about, isn't it?"

"It all depends upon what you mean by love and what you mean by marriage. There are all sorts of different ideas out there. But since you want your wedding to be a Christian service in a Christian church, perhaps we should think about love and marriage by looking at what the marriage service can teach us."

The priest handed each of them a printed sheet with the words "Why Get Married?" across the top. On the sheet were quotations from the marriage service in the *Canadian Book of Common Prayer* (BCP) and *Book of Alternative Services* (BAS).

"Take a moment to read this and then we'll discuss."

Why Get Married?

Our current culture throws at us a variety of answers to this question. Frequent movie images present marriage as the natural outcome of finding a person with whom we have great sex. After experimentation with a variety of partners, something "clicks" with one particular person. Then wedding bells and a happy ever after life follow as a supposedly logical consequence. Another movie theme is "love at first sight." A man meets a woman; both immediately are smitten with each other; then the plot portrays pitfalls along the path from instant romance to the altar.

Anglican marriage services, whether "The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony" (BCP) or "The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage" (BAS), provide three answers to the question, "Why get married?" – love as friendship; love as intimacy; love as mutual support. Together they form a Christian view of marriage.

☞ *Love As Friendship*

Matrimony was ordained for the hallowing of the union betwixt man and woman. (BCP)

Marriage is a gift of God and a means of his grace...It is God's purpose that, as husband and wife give themselves to each other in love, they shall grow together and be united in that love, as Christ is united with his Church. (BAS)

Marriage is the point a couple reaches when each makes a tremendous leap of faith and stakes her or his life on the other person. They make a conscious decision to trust their life to the other absolutely, and to leave that trust with the other person no matter what. It's that which the BAS service describes in the words "husband and wife give themselves to each other in love."

The significance of marriage is that it is a union, a permanent life-commitment between a man and a woman. Then the married life that follows is a process in which "husband and wife... grow together." Romantic love may be the initial attraction, but friendship love is the glue that cements the union. Friendship love is marked by a full awareness of the other person's strengths and weaknesses, with a true liking of the other, "warts and all" as the old saying goes.

The term "partnership" may come to mind here, but that term is inadequate. First, it has the connotation of a business arrangement, as if marriage is, as some feminists put it, all about patrimony and property. Second, it has become an oblique way of describing a couple who are living together unmarried. Friendship love in a marriage is that process in which the couple, having become one, are now growing greater than the sum of the parts. By contrast, in a bad marriage the two never become truly one, and they remain less than the sum of the parts.

The secret of such a union is found in the term "frank discussion," a constant practice of communication in which the hopes and fears, the aspirations and needs of each are discussed on a regular basis. Such discussion rests on a foundation of five key traits in the relationship.

RESPECT On the one hand respect is the act of honouring the other person in thought, word and action as someone created in the image of God. On the other hand, respect is the recognition that, though the two have become one, each is a separate and distinct person and personality, not merely a clone or an appendage of the other.

EQUALITY Marriage is not a master-slave, boss-employee relationship. It is the union of two persons created in the image of God and redeemed by the Cross of Christ. Husband and wife are brother and sister in the Lord's family.

TRUST Suspicion destroys any relationship from the inside out. Thus

both wife and husband need to strive to be trustworthy, to be so constant and true to his or her word that each can rely unquestioningly on the other's dependability.

OPENNESS A marriage is not the place for secrets. Husband and wife need to be able to trust that the other has not hidden anything from them – emotions, work concerns, financial activity, interactions with others.

TRANSPARENCY No motivation is suppressed. No emotion, no like or dislike, is masked from the other. “What you see is what you get” is a key value in personal interactions.

Regular honest communication between spouses leads to the building of family out of two different persons. The key questions which need to be addressed for each spouse in on-going dialogue as the months and years go by are:

- (1) What gifts and interests is God giving us at this point in our life?
- (2) How can we work together to honour and use these gifts and interests so that we each are fulfilled, and we each genuinely become the person God created each to be?
- (3) How can we work together to build and maintain our marriage and family while taking all factors into account?

It takes courage to work on these questions over the entire course of a marriage. The reward however is a friendship love that make the marriage a union blessed by God.

Love As Intimacy

Matrimony was ordained... for the procreation of children to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord. (BCP)

Marriage is a gift of God and a means of his grace, in which a man and woman become one flesh.... The union of man and woman in heart, body, and mind is intended for their mutual comfort and help, that they may know each other with delight and tenderness in acts of love [and that they may be blessed in the procreation, care and upbringing of children]. (BAS)

As both Canadian Anglican worship books make clear, sex is an integral part of marriage. Scripture speaks of the man and the woman becoming “one flesh.” Whenever this phrase appears in the Bible, it is referring to sexual intercourse. In Genesis 2:24 sex between a man and a woman is a part of their marital relationship. Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 19:5 and Mark 10:8 uses the term as a way of referring to marriage. Paul, when writing about the husband-wife relationship, speaks of becoming one flesh as symbolic of the relationship between

Christ and the church. In 1 Corinthians 6:16 Paul uses the term “one flesh” to describe a man having sex with a prostitute.

Historically the church catholic has affirmed that one purpose of marriage is to have children. Since at the time of creation God commanded the newly-created humans to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Genesis 1:28), and since that can occur only through a man and a woman becoming one flesh, Christians think of a true marriage as one in which children are produced. To a point this is true. Sex is “the most sacred expression of love between men and women, belonging exclusively to married lovers” (as McDonald and Wagner wrote in *Taking Love Seriously*), and sexual intercourse is the means by which the human race is continued into a new generation.

But the marriage service leads us an important step further, speaking of “the procreation of children to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord.” A married couple’s prime responsibility is not merely to copulate and produce offspring; it is to so nurture, with food and love and teaching, any children that may be born into the marriage that each child comes to know the Lord God, his or her Creator and Redeemer, well enough to make a responsible decision whether to commit to following and serving the Lord with his or her life.

However the sexual expression of love in a marriage is about more than procreation. It is about the marriage relationship itself. From the very first mention of sexual intercourse recorded in the Bible, in Genesis 4:1, sex is described as one person knowing another: “Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain.” The choice of verb is a pointed lesson that sex is the most intimate act a man and a woman together can undertake. On the other hand Paul writes of a liaison with a prostitute as becoming one flesh, albeit in a totally inappropriate way. This is a sin because it reduces the divine gift of sex to a mere entertainment, an act of personal physical gratification without emotional (or any other form of) commitment to any form of personal relationship. For the same reason casual sex with someone met during an evening of cruising bars or whatever is also sin. Sex is for married partners only.

As McDonald and Wagner note, “when God took Adam’s rib to form Eve, it is apparent that he was designing her, anatomically and psychologically too, for a husband-wife intimacy and union that would match his own intimacy and union with both of them as individuals. Humans are the only creatures that have been made to express love face to face, and to mate in that position.” When two people are face to face, they can read the body language of the other and look the other directly in the eye. Communication becomes a total sensory act, conveying more than words alone are able. When two people are naked face to face, nothing can be hidden, and they truly know each other — so much so that frequently melanoma or breast cancer is first detected by a spouse whose intimate knowledge of the other enables the detection of telltale physiological changes.

Sexual activity, in which wife and husband “know each other with delight

in tenderness and acts of love,” brings to a person’s life an intense intimacy mirroring and surpassed only by God’s knowledge of each of us. The inward intensity and totality of a married couple’s love for each other in heart and mind is given an outward, intimate bodily expression. As such this might be compared to a sacrament, “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace” as our Anglican Catechism puts it.

☞ *Love As Mutual Support*

Matrimony was ordained... for the mutual society, help and comfort that the one ought of have of the other, in both prosperity and adversity. (BCP)

Marriage is a gift of God and a means of his grace... In marriage, husband and wife give themselves to each other, to care for each other in good times and in bad. (BAS)

The fullness of what, in the context of Christian marriage, “I love you” means comes into sharper focus when the couple hear the words “mutual society, help and comfort’ or “to care for each other in good times and in bad.” Love, and therefore marriage, is primarily not about what a person can get out of it, but what she or he can put into it.

The New Testament uses the Greek word “*agape*” to speak of love. “*Eros*”, the Greek word for erotic passion, and “*philia*,” the Greek term for close friendship, are put aside in favour of a word that describes the love of God for humans individually and corporately. “God so loved (*agapēsen*) the world, that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16) and in turn the Son “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). *Agape* love is not sentiment, but action. *Agape* love has as its primary concern the wellbeing of the beloved, with no ulterior self-serving motives. Love is self-sacrifice.

Lest there be any misunderstanding we need to be clear about what self-sacrifice means. It does not mean self-destruction; it is not masochism. Sacrifice means something given, not given up. Sacrifice is a voluntary act of generosity. In the Canadian context this can be illustrated by the game of hockey. To pass to a teammate for a shot on goal a winger will go into the corner behind the opponents’ net, and may be body-checked painfully into the boards. The winger understands that doing this is a sacrifice to and for the team, not an act of self-denigration. Jesus of Nazareth did not see the giving of his life on the Cross as the obliteration of his selfhood, but as a freely-given offering to atone for the sin, the self-willed self-centred rebellion against God, of human beings. That is *agape*.

In the marriage relationship *agape* rests firmly on the foundation of love as friendship discussed earlier. Three questions for regular discussion in a marriage were suggested, two of them beginning, “how can we work together...?” The togetherness of *agape* love moves beyond discussion, leading each spouse

to be proactive and to give of himself or herself unconditionally, without thought of reward, so that the other's well-being can be advanced. The caricature of "the little woman standing by her man," acting as a doormat rather than an equal, is the antithesis of *agape* love. *Agape* love is positive behaviour in which one redeemed child of God acts in a costly way for the sake of the other redeemed child of God, and puts no limit on the cost.

The limitless cost of *agape* love, love as mutual support, is emphasized in the promises bride and bridegroom make to each other. In the words of the BAS service, "I *N* take you *N* to be my wife [husband], to have and to hold from this day forward; for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish for the rest of our lives, according to God's holy law. This is my solemn vow."

The promise is both without limit and without conditions. There are no escape clauses. Each promises to so give of himself or herself that "the mutual society, help, and comfort" of the marital relationship enriches the lives of both; they are a team of self-giving lovers, each dedicated to the other and totally committed to the marriage. Each can rely on the goodwill and help of the other, no matter what the future may bring.

Consequences of Being Married: Responsibilities

"And they lived happily ever after" is a fairytale view of marriage hiding the reality that with marriage come consequences. Every marriage must be lived in the real world where there are a multitude of responsibilities and relationships that can draw the couple together or tear them apart. Most churches require couples to complete some form of marriage preparation to help them recognize the practical issues that lie ahead and then begin to work on mutually agreed strategies to deal with these things. Where churches fail to provide this resource, couples today can find useful books, materials and courses by asking clergy, counsellors or trustworthy friends for their recommendations. The major areas of life that couples need to explore and discuss before the wedding ceremony, as well as all through the marriage, are extended families, building a home and a family, and family finances.

☛ Extended Families

"A man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife," we read in Genesis 2:24. Yes, husband and wife do move out of their respective parental homes, if they have not done so earlier, but they do not leave their families behind. Bonds of affection and respect follow them into marriage. A man and a woman bring to all aspects of their marriage ideas of family learned by word and example from their parents.

The first thing a couple needs to grapple with is the question, "how big is a family?" Many people these days will be tempted to give an answer based upon the size of their nuclear family. Where, then, do an adult's parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, cousins, nephews and nieces fit into

family? Contact with one or many of these may have been lost or broken, but they are still family, and as such they help create a husband and/or wife's idea of what constitutes a family. Each spouse has an idea of family based on her or his experience of relationships, communications, and face-to-face meetings with this wide variety of relatives.

The marriage service in the BCP hints at a more limited view of family. When the priest asks "who giveth this woman to be married to this man?", someone (usually the father), answers, "I do." The BAS service explicitly expands the idea of family, for the priest asks, "Do you, the members of the families of *N* and *N*, give your blessing to this marriage?" To this question "the families of the bride and bridegroom" answer together, "We do." In recognition of the realities of modern family life, the "Marriage Liturgy, Second Form" in *A New Zealand Prayer Book* goes further to offer this possible exchange in the service:

(The priest may say to any children of the bride or groom)
N, will you help *N* and *N* in their marriage?
(The children answer)
Yes, we will

Families are complex entities. Whenever a couple draws the circle around a group of people and calls it family, they must also decide how they as a nuclear family will relate to their extended families. Some couples decide to try to keep all the people they define as family happy, regardless of the cost to themselves. An extreme example of this is the couple who confided to their priest that, to keep family peace, they would be eating four full Christmas dinners, with all the trimmings, in a 48 hour period beginning the evening of Christmas Eve, with both sets of parents and with two sets of grandparents.

As the BAS (along with most contemporary wedding liturgies) makes clear to the relatives of bride and bridegroom, they have a duty to the couple being married; "Will you do all in your power to support and uphold this marriage?" The key word is "support"; that precludes other persons making demands on the couple, no matter how well-meaning those demands might be. The often bitter jokes about "in-laws" being "out-laws" give testimony to the high price relatives may expect a married couple to pay in order to be members in good standing of the husband's and/or wife's extended family.

Yet the "out-laws" should not be regarded as totally to blame for destructive patterns in family relationships. Each married couple needs to take seriously the words at the beginning of the BAS service, "they are linked to each other's families, and they begin a new life together in the community." While marriage extends the man's and the woman's family ties to include their spouse's family, they are first and foremost building "a new life together." That new life is based upon, among other vows, the promise "to love and to cherish." A person is not treasuring his or her spouse if he or she in any way privileges any other member(s) of the family over the spouse. To do so erodes the trust that

one spouse ought to have in the other, and the erosion of trust attacks the very basis of the marital relationship from the inside out. However an honest discussion of all the possible ways to relate to each other's families and a mutual decision on how they as a couple will order their relationships with members of their extended families can build a life in which they and their families can be a blessing to each other.

☛ *Building a Home and a Family*

It has become part of our cultural folk wisdom that a couple buy a house and then make it into a home. The first is an impersonal structure, while the second is both a joint expression of the marital identity and a place of psychological comfort for both spouses. Other people build houses for them, but only each married couple can build their particular home.

The first step in building a home is not determining a colour scheme or choosing a style of furniture, important as these things are. In the BAS service the congregation prays for the newly married couple, "May their home be a place of faith, security and love." Then in the concluding blessing the priest asks God to grant "that their home may be a haven of blessing and peace." Every married couple's home is built upon the relationship they share. Where there is *agape* love, truth and security can flourish, and their home will reflect this in the way that both husband and wife are represented in the decor — personal pictures and mementos precious to each, plus things that express their shared experiences and interests. Visitors will be greeted and put at their ease not by the words "welcome to my home," but by "welcome to our home." The home expresses to the couple and to their world that they are one.

Creating a home is paralleled by and interdependent with the building of a family. Of the many possible descriptions of family, the most thought-provoking was given by Edith Schaeffer in her book, *What is a Family?*

A family is a mobile... the most versatile, ever-changing mobile that exists... that is different from the handicraft mobiles... of birds, fish, and animals. A family is an intricate mobile made up of human personalities.... A family is a grouping of people who are affecting each other intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, physically and psychologically

This unit starts with a husband and a wife, a mother and a father, and grows when one or more children is born or adopted into the marital relationship. Eventually the founding couple open their lives and their concept of "our family" to include the spouses of their children, and then grandchildren.

As the twenty-first century progresses most people in the Western world subscribe to the idea that two incomes are a necessity to support a family. This thought is one of the many factors that couples consider when making a decision about whether to have children and, if so, how many and at what time in the course of the marriage. Some spouses fear the responsibilities of child-

rearing and many are apprehensive of the emotional cost invested in raising children. While many couples speak of their children as a (possibly mixed) blessing and would choose to have children if once again faced with the choice of whether or not to become parents, some wives and husbands choose to be childless. And some couples are physiologically unable to conceive, or can do so only with much medical intervention that is expensive, in both money and emotions. Each couple needs to ponder the question of whether to bring children into their life and family, and to reach a decision with which both are comfortable.

By using the image of a mobile to indicate the nature of a family, Schaeffer highlighted the dynamic quality of a family. Each person changes over time, the result of life experiences inside and outside the family and of physiological changes, although the essential personhood remains stable. As each and every person changes, the relationship among various family members and the social dynamic of the family unit are modified. Yet while these changes are happening in and to the family, the basic principles guiding relationships within the family remain.

In Ephesians 5:22–6:4 the apostle Paul writes about family relationships in his time and culture. Embedded in his teaching are basic Christian principles that can and must be lived out in every age and place. First there is the principle of mutual respect and responsibility. Even for a society such as Paul's with a strong hierarchical view of family relationships, the apostle repeatedly makes the point that in a family duties and obligations, rights and privileges are reciprocal. For example, children are to honour and obey their parents, and parents are at all times to treat their children with respect.

The second principle is that Jesus Christ is Lord over all of life. Each person's primary loyalty is to Christ, and that loyalty is to colour all relationships within the family. As Christ came to serve (Matthew 20:27-28), so each of his followers, regardless of her or his place within the family, is called to serve the other family members and to make the welfare and best interests of spouse and/or child and/or parent a priority second only to Christ. No family member is to be sacrificed to the demands of the job. No family member is to be abandoned for the sake of leisure pursuits. No family member is to be put aside so that the dictates of one's peer group can be obeyed. Only obedience to Christ supersedes one's obligations to the family.

☞ *Family Finances*

With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee honour, and all my worldly goods with thee I share. (BCP)

With all that I am and all that I have, I honour you in the name of God. (BAS)

Regardless of the wedding rite used, the promises made at the moment married life begins include a promise to integrate the financial affairs of the man

and the woman into a single unit. The BCP is more explicit about it, but the BAS points in the same direction. These promises point to a reality that not everyone is willing to recognize, namely that how a couple deals with the financial part of their relationship indicates how the relationship is being lived. Is there absolute transparency about all money, property and assets held by one or both of them, or does one spouse hide certain financial details from the other? Too often it proves true that if a spouse withholds financial information, he or she may be less than open and honest about other things.

The financial life of married couples begins with the source of their money, and for most that means working for a living. Seldom is it possible for a couple to “survive” on one income, in view of the increasing high costs of housing and childrearing. A couple’s growing expectation of what “the necessities of life” means also contributes to the need for two incomes. Thus a couple must determine what level of income is enough. Another factor is how each views work and careers; they can be about more than money. Many people find their sense of personal purpose and worth springs from their job; some even believe their value to their spouse and their self rests on the money they bring to the family coffers. A marital relationship many require a great deal of healing if there is any suggestion of ranking or valuing based on income earned.

The management of the family’s financial affairs can also be a source of discord. The marriage vows include a promise to share, and this means that all assets are not “mine and yours,” but “ours” — bank accounts; house; car; investments; retirement funds. “Ours” means joint ownership of property, joint signing authority on all accounts, and designating the spouse as the beneficiary for all registered funds (e.g., pensions and Registered Income Funds). “Ours” means there are no secrets; there is no withholding of money or financial information.

Even when all financial and property assets are held jointly, there is still the question of who controls the purse, who acts as the family treasurer. In some marital relationships one of the spouses does not want to have much to do with the everyday money management; money makes him or her nervous, or requires mathematical skills he or she does not possess. Abdication from any significant role regarding the financial life of the family by one spouse, or the acquiescing in this by the other spouse, creates a danger within the marriage.

Our use of money is a reflection of deeply held values, although not all those values may be recognized at a conscious level. As Christ said, “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:21) The choice of priorities in spending money reflects and reinforces the values held. Some spend their money in a way designed to bring them recognition as being generous; some spend their money in order to project an image of personal importance or security; some spend their money to gain pleasure; some fear spending. Our hearts and our money walk side by side, and for this reason it is important to the health of a marriage not just to own all assets jointly, but also to set spending priorities by mutual consent. To do so a husband and wife

must share with great honesty their values and aspirations in order to become one in heart, body and mind. It is only when this mutually agreed unity of priorities for the use of their financial assets is achieved that each can trust in the other's care for them in good times and in bad.

First-aid for Marriage

Wilt thou love [her/him], comfort [her/him], honour, and keep [her/him], in sickness and in health; and forsaking all other, keep thee only unto [her/him] so long as you both shall live? (BCP)

In various ways and at several points in the service, the marriage liturgy speaks of the Christian understanding of marriage as a life-long commitment. Throughout Scripture marriage is a monogamous relationship in which mutual fidelity for life is the rule. Thus the opening exhortation in the wedding service reminds the couple that marriage “is not by any to be entered upon, nor taken in hand, unadvisedly, lightly or wantonly; but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God.” (BCP) “[I]t is a way of life that all should reverence and none should lightly undertake.” (BAS) But taking marriage seriously does not guarantee that a particular marriage will be crisis-free. So, thought must be given to dealing with the less-than-perfect times that come into every marriage.

☛ When Troubles Come

Our world today — what we see in the media, the entertainment industry, and everyday experience — does not provide us with good examples of how to live out a marriage relationship. Romantic relationships are assumed and then discarded very easily at the first sign of any problem or disagreement. The media reinforces this “taking marriage lightly” view by reporting excessively on celebrity relationships, suggesting that “differences” are a sign that a marriage is failing and that “irreconcilable differences,” the new euphemism for mutual self-centredness, should end a marriage.

What constitutes a serious problem in a marriage? Some people would answer that it's the feeling of no longer being in love with one's spouse. This view reduces the marriage relationship to nothing more than an emotional attachment, something that can and does change. Certainly the emotional high from falling in love and getting engaged and having a wedding cannot be sustained for long. It's an artificial high that slowly subsides as a less dramatic but deeper emotional attachment takes its place. A failure to be prepared for and to recognize this normal development may lead some couples to see their marriage as doomed. Often such simple acts as frequently holding hands, going for a walk together, or taking time for a lingering conversation-filled meal can help both spouses recognize that their loving commitment is still present, though now it takes a different form.

Other people treat as a problem the uneven development of one spouse's

career compared to the other's. This may provoke a sense of rivalry in the other spouse. Sometimes, instead of competitiveness there is a sense of loss by one spouse; the more successful spouse's time and energy may be increasingly focused on his or her career, while the other spouse gets less time and attention than earlier in the marriage. The spouse whose career is developing rapidly may begin to regard the "less successful" spouse as a disappointment, perhaps even as a liability. In these sorts of circumstances any possible negative feelings and impact can be mitigated by a regular review and honest discussion of how both spouses can work to help the other make fulfilling use of their talents and opportunities. Marriage is a partnership in which both are committed to the other's welfare. That can mean acting to enhance the other's career by providing behind-the-scenes support, or slowing down one's own career advancement so that it doesn't harm the relationship.

From time to time tension arises which demonstrates new or previously unrecognized differences between spouses. If it is about a trivial matter such as how the toothpaste tube is squeezed, laughter is the best treatment. But if it is about a more substantive matter such as spending priorities, buying a house, or disciplining children, honestly confronting the differences is the only healthy course of action. Both spouses need to openly explain how each thinks and feels about the contentious matter. Each should take care to listen attentively and to assure the other that his or her feelings and ideas have been both heard and considered. Only then is it possible to move on to the task of learning where each spouse is willing to be flexible. At this point the couple may find a way to resolve their difference. But if the difference still seems significant, a wise course of action may be to defer a decision to a future time when both will be prepared to return to and re-examine what is dividing them. A pastor or counsellor may be useful to help with communication and, if necessary, to mediate between husband and wife so that a workable decision can be reached.

As the wedding service draws toward its close the BAS includes this petition for the couple: "may their lives together be a sacrament of your love to this broken world, so that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy overcome despair." The congregation is praying that the wife-husband relationship will be modelled upon Christ's redemptive love and actions for the human race. We live in a "broken world" where even the best person with the best motives will sometimes act in ways that are far less than perfect. So in a marriage when a couple begins to feel distanced from one another, they have the loving commitment they have made to each other as a reality to which they can turn as a bridge to each other. When one spouse in some manner harms the other — from a stepped-on toe, to a forgotten birthday or anniversary, to a broken promise to carry out a family task — the appropriate response is forgiveness, not recrimination. When one spouse is experiencing sorrow or depression, the other spouse should reach out with a word, a touch, an action that expresses a gentle Christian joy and brings some

sign of hope and future possibility to their dejected mate. In married life couples continually learn what it means when one spouse says “I love you” by how she or he acts when troubles come.

☞ *The Dark Side*

Jesus pointedly acknowledged that sin can have a serious, negative effect on a marriage. In conversation with rabbis he pointed to God’s intention that marriage be a permanent union of a man and a woman. Yet through Moses God allowed divorce “because of the hardness of your heart.” (Mark 10:5) Jesus says not that Moses was wrong to permit divorce, but that human sin can so inflict damage on human life that the dissolution of a marriage is the lesser of two evils. The “one flesh” bond has been broken in a way that makes its restoration well beyond human repair.

Marriage is the closest of human bonds, a union superseding even one’s allegiance to the bonds of blood. At its core the “one flesh,” physical union indicates the completeness and comprehensiveness of the marriage bond. When this core act of exclusive union is breached, whether by a once-only act or a longer term liaison, the bonds of marriage have been shattered and God’s purpose in creation (Genesis 2:24) has been transgressed. Thus Scripture permits, though not requires, divorce when adultery has taken place.

In 21st century society, many would not see adultery as a serious matter, if periodic newspaper reports on the frequency of adulterous affairs are at all accurate. “She/he will not be bothered” or “he/she will forgive me” is the attitude of many a spouse. The wronged spouse may well forgive the adulterous one, but that forgiveness only has effect if the forgiven admits doing wrong and is prepared to change. However there is a difference between forgiving and forgetting. Restoring trust may be possible, but only with a renewed openness, honesty and transparency on the part of both spouses.

The marriage promises are also broken when one spouse exploits the other. Many examples of this can be seen in our society. There are men who marry a woman to use her as “eye candy,” an attractive companion for social or job-related events. This man is seeking to gain status and an aura of personal worth through the beauty of his wife. Both men and women may seek a spouse for the sake of his or her income or wealth. In other situations one spouse may make the other an unwitting partner in questionable business dealings or pursue transactions that will put the other in financial jeopardy. In whatever form it may take marital exploitation is dishonesty, for professions of love, care and support are being undermined by actions that privilege oneself over one’s spouse. Thus in a different sense, the “one flesh” of marriage is being broken because the mutual respect that underpins the marriage promises is absent.

This brings us to a subject many clergy and persons in the pew try to avoid — spousal abuse. While wives do abuse husbands, the majority of abuse is of wives by their husbands. There will be at least one abused spouse in any average-sized congregation, despite the frequently held view that “it doesn’t

happen in our church.” Abuse can take many forms, both physical and psychological. A woman may frequently have bruises on her arms or legs, or red marks on her face; she is being beaten, or perhaps being subjected to marital rape. A man or a woman may become overly quiet and withdrawn whenever the spouse enters the room. A woman may be fearful of spending money. Both are signs of psychological abuse. Abuse is the negation of another’s very personhood, and as such can be seen as a breaching of the sixth commandment, even though there is no cessation of breathing. Indeed both physical and psychological abuse can lead to suicidal thoughts, even attempts, by the victimized spouse.

“Will you do all in your power to support and uphold this marriage?” (BAS) those attending a wedding are asked. The affirmative answer, “we will,” is not a promise to work to keep the marriage alive even when one spouse is being irreparably harmed. It’s a promise to help keep a healthy marriage healthy and to help a troubled marriage seek appropriate resources to attempt a restoration. In the case of abuse the promise means not ignoring the telltale signs of abuse, but helping the abused spouse find safety and the abuser find psychiatric help; it can also mean reporting the abuse to police domestic violence officers. Such actions are not a betrayal of God’s purpose for marriage, but a realistic grappling with a human sin that can destroy both a marriage and one or both spouses. Such actions are a protecting of someone made in God’s image and a valuing of God’s purposes for marriage.

Taking Marriage Seriously

Marriage is the sacrament and the reality of the creative purpose of God for us.

Thus marriage between a man and a woman is, like all of creation, “very good.” (Genesis 1:31) When a man and a woman come together “in the sight of God, and the face of this congregation,” they are responding in obedience to God’s creative purpose. At the same time they are accepting from God a great gift, the love and care and faithful companionship of a fellow fallen child of God, a gift that banishes loneliness and brings the gift of wholeness to their individual lives as they become “one flesh.”

Taking marriage seriously means acknowledging this and then approaching and participating in marriage with the eyes and heart and mind of Christian realism. This means living out the divine purposes for marriage – friendship; intimacy; mutual support – and accepting the responsibilities of marriage – an extended family; a home and a family; financial management. However Christian realism also means not turning a blind eye to the damage human sin can inflict on a marriage, but facing up to the worst that sin can do and searching for help in time of marital distress while seeking both safety and healing for those damaged by sin within the marriage. And where each of us is faithful to marriage and faithful within marriage, we will find a life of quiet joy in the sort of marital relationship God intended for his children.

Questions for Study and Discussion

1. What does marriage mean to you?
2. Do you know what marriage means to your spouse? Have you communicated this to your spouse?
3. What practical things can you and your spouse (or fiancé) do to ensure a healthy marriage?
4. How important to you is providing positive support to the marriages of family and friends? What can you do to provide such support?
5. Can you identify signs of spousal abuse? Where can you learn more in order to help those around you whose lives are shattered by abuse?
6. What can your church do to encourage healthy marriages? To help troubled marriages?

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