

# REFORMING MARRIAGE

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Of course, this book is for Nancy.  
*Foedus amorum est.*

# Reforming Marriage

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## Introduction

*And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma. (Eph. 5:2)*

How would you describe the spiritual aroma of your home? When visitors arrive, before virtually anything is said or done, what is one of the first things they notice about your family? In many cases, it is the *aroma*. Do they feel as though a bad attitude crawled under your refrigerator and died? Or do they think someone has been baking spiritual bread in the kitchen all afternoon?

Perhaps the one living in the home is not in the best position to answer this question. Aromas are the sorts of things one gets used to. The residents usually do not notice those things that immediately strike a visitor. So if there is an offensive aroma in the home, it can sometimes be a difficult problem to solve. No easy formula of resolution is available. Nevertheless, the Bible does teach on the subject. The text noted above says that when Christians walk in love they are imitating Christ, and the sacrifice of Christ is a pleasant aroma to God. Similarly, a Christ-like home atmosphere produces this sort of aroma before God and consequently before man.

In other words, keeping God's law with a whole heart (which is really what love *is*) is not only seen in overt acts of obedience. The collateral effect of obedience is the aroma of love. This aroma is out of reach for those who have a

hypocritical desire to be known by others as a keeper of God's law. Many can fake an attempt at keeping God's standards in some external way. What we *cannot* fake is the resulting, distinctive aroma of pleasure to God.

In the home, where should this wholehearted obedience begin? Where should the aroma originate? Jesus taught us, with regard to individuals, that cups must be cleaned from the inside out. If we apply this principle to the home, we should see that the "inside" of a family is, of course, the relationship between husband and wife, as they self-consciously imitate the relationship of Christ and the church. John Bunyan once exhorted husbands to be "such a believing husband to your believing wife that she may say, 'God has not only given me a husband, but such a husband as preaches to me every day the way of Christ to His church.'" The health of all other relationships in the home depends upon the health of *this* relationship, and the key is found in how the husband is treating his wife. Or, put another way, when mamma ain't happy, ain't nobody happy.

Later in the fifth chapter of Ephesians, Paul tells husbands to love their wives as they love their own bodies. He then points out that each person nourishes and cherishes his own body. The word for *cherishes* in that passage literally means *to keep warm*. Consequently, one of the fundamental duties of husbandry is for the husband to keep his wife *warm*. When that is done, the rest of the home is warm. But how can he keep her warm? Notice that our text says that we are to *walk* in love. A wife is not kept warm in the securing love of a husband if he is erratic in how he loves her. If he is harsh with her or ignores her but occasionally shows her kindness, he is not walking in love. The kind of love Paul requires here is *constant*. So godly husbandry is constant husbandry.

And as the context makes clear, the love in this passage is also *imitative*. It is learned from a Person; it is learned through watching Jesus Christ. As children learn from their parents through watching them, so Christians are to learn from Christ.

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This means that a husband who loves his wife is *not* a pioneer. It has all been done before. Christ has loved the Church in the same the way He wants men to love their wives. He has done so as an *example*. The love and affection of Christ has been set upon His people alone. In the same way, husbands are to love their wives alone. This is the duty I hope to explain in this book in some detail.

But we should already know from all of this that such obedience is not exhausted by the external conformity to God's requirements. Godly obedience will always bring in its train a host of *intangibles*. These intangibles constitute the aroma of obedience, and this aspect of true obedience frustrates the paint-by-numbers approach to marriage enhancement. This is why I am afraid that this book will be of little use to those who simply want a "formula" to follow that will build them a happy marriage. When it comes to the externals, the mere copyist can always say of himself what the unregenerate Saul could say, "concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless." However hard the externalist tries, he cannot produce the aroma of godliness. This is why so many people attend marriage seminars and read marriage books with so little result. The obedience of the Christian man is not limited to new *actions*—actions which, after all, can be copied mechanically. This does not appear to be a rare or unusual error; many people who are miserable in their marriages are also those who have read all the books.

Of course, certain actions—godly obedience in externals—must be present in all healthy marriages; but in order to produce this distinctive aroma, the externals must proceed from new *hearts*. As William Tyndale put it, when God "buildeth he casteth all downe first. He is no patcher." In the same way, the love of the Christian husband does not proceed from reading the "right books," including this one, or going to the right seminars. God will not patch His grace onto some humanistic psychological nonsense—even if that nonsense is couched and buried in Christian terminology. It proceeds from

an obedient heart, and the greatest desire of an obedient heart is the glory of God, *not* the happiness of the household. If we might paraphrase the words of the catechism, the chief end of *marriage* is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. The reason we are miserable in our marriages is because we have idolized them. But the glory of God is more important than our domestic happiness.

In the world God made, if a creature worships anything other than the Creator God, then ultimately he loses the very thing he idolizes and worships. Husbands must love their wives; they must *not* worship them. Those who lose their lives find it, and those who seek to find it will lose it. Those who place their wives before God will lose their wives. Those who glorify God will of course obey Him in their self-sacrificial love for their wives. It should go without saying that a wife is greatly blessed when her husband loves Christ more than he loves her. When a husband seeks to glorify God in his home, he will be equipped to love his wife as he is commanded. And if he loves his wife as commanded, the aroma of his home will be pleasant indeed.



## A Practical Theology of Marriage

### Foundations

A short walk through the marriage and family section of the local Christian bookstore easily demonstrates that modern Christians have a tremendous interest in the subject of marriage and family. But this booming marriage business (books, conferences, seminars, marriage counseling) is really a sign of disease and not health. In a very real sense, our interest is morbid, almost pathological. We are like a terminal cancer patient, fervently researching alternative treatments, hoping against hope that something can be done. Desperate for happiness in our relationships, and discontent with what God has given us, we are imploring the experts to show us the way out.

God is the Lord. He is central to the coherence of all things, including marriage. He has the preeminence over heaven and earth, and all His human creatures have the moral responsibility to acknowledge that preeminence in all they do, including how they marry. A man and a woman who have this orientation together, in a covenant bond, enjoy a Christian marriage. If they deny or ignore this truth, they do so at their peril. A mature Christian is one who understands that it is the duty of all human creatures to glorify God in all things. It therefore stands to reason that a mature Christian man will be a mature husband. Likewise, a mature Christian woman will be a mature wife. *Maturity in the Lord is a prerequisite to maturity in marriage.*

In studying the subject of marriage, we must begin with the biblical instruction on the nature and character of God. When we have come to understand that He is indeed the Lord, we will naturally turn to Him to learn how His gracious law applies to the foundation and purpose of marriage.

### **The Covenant**

The nature of the triune God is described to us in Scripture under the figure of a father-son bond. God is the *Father*, and Jesus Christ is His only *Son*. Before He laid the foundation of the earth, the Father had already selected a *bride* for His Son. That bride is the Christian church, the elect of God. “Then one of the seven angels. . . came to me and talked with me, saying, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb’s wife.’ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God. . .” (Rev. 21:9–10).

Paul teaches us that we ought self-consciously to think of our marriages as dim pictures of the central marriage, that of Christ to His church. It is a great mystery, he says, but when a man leaves his father and mother, and takes a wife, he makes a proclamation concerning Christ and the church. Depending on the marriage, that declaration is made poorly or well, but it is always made.

We can, therefore, see how the foundation of marriage is *covenantal*. God’s relationship to us through Christ is covenantal—it is the New Covenant—and our marriages are a picture of that truth. The foundation of godly married life is the same foundation for all godly living—in everything we are to seek the glory of God. Our triune God is a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God, and He has chosen *marriage* as one of the best instruments through which fallen men may glorify Him.

In attacking the covenantal nature of marriage, the error of feminism has been very valuable. Throughout the history of the church, destructive heresies have been used by a

sovereign God to force the church to define that which was unclear. It was the heretic Marcion who provoked the church into identifying the canon of Scripture, it was the heretic Arius who forced the church to testify clearly to the full deity of the Lord Jesus, and so on. In our day, feminism is providing that same service through its challenge of the marriage covenant.

Without the defiance of error, we can very easily just drift along, doing what seems “natural” or “traditional.” Countless thousands do quite a number of things because it “just seems right.” When and if that practice is ever challenged, however, the traditionalist is nonplussed. “Well, I’m not sure *why* I do that, really.” Consider our practice of a woman taking her husband’s last name. Why do we do that? Why does Susan Miller become Susan Carter? Does the Bible require it?

Surprisingly for some, the Bible does teach that God calls a husband and wife by the same name—the name of the husband. This fully supports both our particular custom of taking a new name, as well as the covenantal truth that custom represents.

“This is the book of the genealogy of Adam. In the day that God created man, He made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female, and blessed them and called them *mankind* in the day they were created” (Gen. 5:2). In Hebrew, the italicized word translated *mankind* is *Adam*. In other words, God created Adam and his wife male and female, He blessed them, and called *them* Adam. She was, from the beginning, a covenantal partaker in the name of her husband. God does not call her Adam on her own, He calls her Adam *with him*.

Adam first noticed the lack of a suitable helper after naming the animals. “So Adam gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper comparable to him. And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He

took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place” (Gen. 2:20–21). When Adam was naming the animals, he was not just attaching labels randomly. In the ancient world, names were extremely significant and represented the nature and character of that which was named. This significance is very clear in the Genesis accounts of the naming of Adam’s wife. In naming the animals, Adam saw none who could be appropriately named as a helper suitable for him.

After the creation of his wife, Adam receives her, and *names* her. “And Adam said: ‘This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman [*Ishshah*, not Eve], because she was taken out of Man.’ Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Gen 2:23–24).

As verse 24 shows, Adam and *Ishshah* were a paradigmatic couple. *They were not just any two individuals*. When the Lord Jesus taught on the subject of divorce, He appealed to the creation ordinance of marriage found in the early chapters of Genesis. He taught us that *God* puts a man and woman together in marriage, and what God has joined together man has no authority to separate. The temptation is to argue that in Genesis God only joined together Adam and Eve—two individuals as individuals. But this argument resists the teaching of Christ, who insisted that Adam and Eve were a paradigmatic couple. When God joined *them* together, He was joining together *every* man and woman who has ever come together sexually in a covenant bond.

Other facts are obvious as well from this creation ordinance of marriage. Because God created Adam and Eve, homosexuality is excluded. Because Adam could find no helper for himself among the animals, bestiality is excluded. And because God created just *one* woman for Adam, the pattern of monogamy is clearly set and displayed to us. The polygamy found in the Old Testament among the saints of God does not alter this. Polygamy was instituted by *man*, and not by God. The first record of a polygamous union was Lamech

(Gen. 4:19), with no hint of divine approval. But most important, polygamy does not fit with the creation ordinance of marriage or with the picture given in the New Testament of Christ and the church.

So in this passage of Genesis, we are taught that Adam's reception of the woman, and his naming of her, were to be a pattern for all marriages to come. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother . . ." Now at this point Adam had not yet named his wife *Eve*. Adam gave his wife two individual names. The first was *Ishshah*, or Woman, because she was taken out of man. The second was *Chavvah*—life-bearer, or as we say it in English, *Eve*. "And Adam called his wife's name *Eve* [*Chavvah*], because she was the mother of all living" (Gen. 3:20).

In both passages where she is named, it is clearly stated that her two names reveal truth about her. The first reveals her dependence upon man—she was taken out of man. The second reveals man's dependence upon her—every man since is her son. Millennia later, the apostle Paul teaches us that we are continually to remember these two truths in our marriages. Each wife is an *Ishshah*, and each wife is a *Chavvah*. Each is Woman, and each is Eve.

"Nevertheless, neither is man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord. For as woman came from man, even so man also comes through woman; but all things are from God" (1 Cor. 11:11–12). Notice that the progression of Paul's thought follows the same pattern seen in Genesis. Woman "came from man (*Ishshah*), even so man also comes through woman (*Chavvah*); but all things are from God" (*Adam*).

God is the one who called our first parents by the collective name Adam. Now Adam is also a generic term for *man* or *mankind*. This shows clearly the biblical practice of including women under such a description. Our English use of the generic *man* and *mankind* follows this biblical example exactly. Far from being insulting to women, as feminists want

to maintain, it reflects a biblical pattern of thought. The feminist reaction to this, and their rejection of taking a new last name (in order to keep their *father's* name!), is not just a small bit of modern silliness. It is a fundamental rebellion against God. So when our Susan Miller becomes Mrs. Robert Carter it is not just “something we do.” It is covenant security.

With this basic framework for understanding the marriage covenant, we may turn to consider the basic purposes of marriage. The Bible sets forth three basic *earthly* reasons for marriage. They are, in turn, the need for helpful companionship, the need for godly offspring, and the avoidance of sexual immorality.

### **Helpful Companionship**

The Bible teaches that God placed Adam in the garden and gave him a task to perform. But the man was incapable of accomplishing that task alone. Adam needed help, and the woman was created to meet his need.

Out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them. And whatever Adam called each living creature, that was its name. So Adam gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper comparable to him. And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. Then the rib which the Lord God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man. And Adam said, “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. (Gen. 2:19–24)

We should be able to see the connection between Adam’s work of naming the beasts and the next phrase—“but for Adam there was not found a helper comparable to him.” The

modern mentality tends to think of “naming things” as a simple scientific matter of attaching labels. But here Adam is naming the beasts with a name suitable to the nature of each. As mentioned above, in the process of naming, he realizes he has found no suitable helper—no one among the animals with a nature comparable to his. He could not name any as a helper.

In the verse immediately prior to this passage God had said that it was *not good* that man should be *alone*. Throughout the process of creation, whenever God completed a work, He then pronounced it good. Obviously, such a pronouncement from the Creator indicates completion. But the Lord’s statement that it was not good that man be alone is a clear indication that the creation of man was still incomplete. “And the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him’” (Gen. 2:18). Adam was incomplete because he lacked a companion, one who would be a helper comparable to him.

The New Testament applies this truth in a very interesting way. “Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man” (1 Cor. 11:9). As a result of the creation order, men and women are oriented to one another differently. They need one another, but they need one another *differently*. The man needs *the* help; the woman needs *to* help. Marriage was created by God to provide companionship in the labor of dominion. The cultural mandate, the requirement to fill and subdue the earth, is still in force, and a husband cannot fulfill this portion of the task in isolation. He needs a companion suitable for him in the work to which God has called him. He is called to the work and must receive help from her. She is called to the work through ministering to him. He is oriented to the task, and she is oriented to him.

### Godly Children

One of the things which man obviously cannot do alone is reproduce, and this is a second purpose for marriage. In filling the earth, which is what God commanded, a man alone is completely helpless. So the prophet Malachi tells us that another stated purpose of marriage is the blessing of godly offspring.

But did he not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit?  
And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth. (Mal. 2:15)

God tells us quite plainly here that one of the purposes of marriage is procreation. Further, if it is a godly marriage, it should be godly procreation. God has said that He wants *godly* offspring. The prophet Malachi states, as a means to that end, the importance of *treating wives with honor*. If a man is treacherous to his wife, it will clearly have a negative effect on the children. Godly children are not said to give purpose to *parenting*, but rather they are a purpose of *marriage*.

### Sexual Protection

Adam needed a helpful companion before the Fall. He was also unable to multiply descendants alone before the Fall. So the first two purposes of marriages mentioned above are not necessarily related to the presence of sin. But the third reason why Christians should marry is connected to the presence of sin and temptation. The apostle Paul states it this way:

Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband. Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband. (1 Cor. 7:2-3)



We live in a fallen world, and, as a consequence, Christians frequently struggle with temptations to lust, fornication, and adultery. The Bible does not teach that such temptations will always painlessly go away through a mysterious process of “trusting God.” Unfortunately, the struggle against sexual sin seems to many to be more like sweating bullets than “letting go and letting God.” The Bible teaches us that this experience is not surprising. Peter says that we are to “abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul . . .” (1 Pet. 2:11). Paul uses the same kind of violent imagery when he says that Christians must “put to death [their] members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (Col. 3:5).

Now God has provided a very practical help for Christians as they struggle with sexual temptation; that help is called sexual activity. In order to provide satisfactory protection, sexual relations with a spouse should not be infrequent. There needs to be quantitative protection, particularly for the husband. At the same time, the benefit of sexual relations should not be measured merely in terms of frequency or amount. There needs to be qualitative protection, particularly for the benefit of the wife.

If Christian couples come to understand that the ultimate purpose of their marriage is to glorify God, they have taken an important first step. If they then seek to define the secondary purposes of their union as defined in Scripture, they will be equipped to consider the biblical instruction concerning the attitude they should have about marriage, and to receive general and particular instruction from God’s Word concerning their duties in the home.