



## Vows

Over the past number of years I have witnessed what I call a disturbing development, and it pertains to our vows, particularly those made in wedding ceremonies. The trend is that we are beginning to see and use the vows as a promise to each other and not to God.

Let me explain what I mean. During a wedding ceremony, when it comes to the exchange of vows, the bridal couple turns to each other and says the vows, either answering on the minister's cue or repeating the vows.

I do not have a problem, as such, with the fact that some couples like to say the vow themselves. If they repeat the vow as agreed in our *Marriage Form*, this is not an issue for me. I have noticed, however, that now and then the phrasing is subtly changed. The vows in our form are based squarely on the Word of God, and no one has the right to change the wording to suit personal taste.

Therefore I have determined to follow the old way. The minister reads the vow and asks the bride and groom to answer. This may seem to some as a step back, but it is necessary to prevent wrong ideas from creeping into the church. I've tried to be accommodating; now it's time to get serious.

### **What is a vow?**

Of greater importance is the answer to the question: what is a vow? It is, as noted above, not a promise to each other, but a promise to God. We promise the Lord that we will be faithful to each other. Of course, in doing so, we also commit ourselves to one another. But a vow is first and foremost an oath before God.

Let me give you some clear biblical evidence. In Psalm 116:14 we find: "*I will fulfil my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people.*" Notice that the vow is connected with the LORD.

There are all kinds of vows. We make them when a child is baptized, when we enter into an office, or when we are married. But these vows are not made to the child, the church or the groom or bride! This vow is made to the Lord God. The congregation is a witness to this vow which has the quality of an oath. We promise God that we will do what is required. The vow is also therefore a prayer: so help me God. We cannot keep these vows in our own strength, but we need the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

If a bridal couple wishes to look anywhere, they should look upwards, to heaven, where Christ is. For He alone has made the vow possible and will enable us to keep it.

### **Is this an important matter?**

Someone might think: this is not really an important matter. Why bother splitting hairs? *But the matter is extremely important.* The strength of the vow is precisely that it is a commitment made to God. Therefore it may not be broken. If we do break the vow, we have sinned against God. If we keep the vow, it is for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Nowadays marriage is all too easily seen as an arrangement between two persons. We make our promises to each other, but since we are limited, sinful human beings, we can hardly be expected to keep these promises. Then it is not so hard to break a promise made at a specific occasion.

After all, nobody's perfect. Modern thinking is: if the arrangement does not work out or becomes a burden, it is best to terminate it. Why should we stay in an unhappy relationship? Then it is crucial to be reminded of the fact that we made a *vow to God*. We have to keep the marriage together and functioning for the sake of the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Our lasting love to Him *supersedes* our failing love for each other.

I have counselled couples in some difficult situations to keep their marriage alive and together for the sake of the Name of the Lord. Did we not *begin* our marriage in his name with the stated goal to *complete* it to his glory? We must keep in mind that our marriage is not just a matter between two people but a key matter between the Lord and a couple. When a marriage is broken or dissolved, it is the name of the Lord that is compromised. This is the spiritual level on which we must see our marriage vows, and all the other vows we might make in the varying circumstances of life.

I would like to ask: on what basis can we properly counsel and help those with difficult marriages than on their vows to God? When all else fails, He does not fail. He asks of us repentance and forgiveness, and gives us the ability to continue in persevering hope. A marriage only has a future when the parties involved realize that they in faith have made a vow to the Lord. Otherwise all counselling falls short of the mark.

### **The sanctity of our vows**

It is not so hard to make a promise. Promises are broken on a daily basis. That is a sad reality which we see around us, among us, and in our own lives. This explains the emergence of organizations like *Promise Keepers*. I applaud the effort of every good organization, but in this case I must note that the starting point is all wrong. We need to understand that we have made a vow before God and in that light we keep our promises. Our vow is a sacred oath.

We live in an age in which everything is being personalized and made superficial. Marriage is a crumbling institution. Same-sex marriages are being advocated as legal. The divorce rate in our country is staggering. Children are being aborted or abused. Promises are broken every day.

But we must *keep our vows* prayerfully and humbly because they have been made to the Lord. Let us in all these important matters of life begin and end with God. Otherwise we will not stand. The old Marriage Form is not to fall into disrepute but is to be esteemed as a fine and important biblical document. Also when it comes to the vows, it should not be replaced with alternative formulations.

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