

Outline

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Marriage

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MARRIAGE

Introduction

"Marriage is an institution of God which pleases Him, and must therefore be held in honour among all". This is the summary of what the Word of God teaches us about marriage according to the Form for Marriage. Marriage is not a human invention, but a gift of God. It is so special that He uses marriage as an image to describe the unique relationship between Himself and the Church.

1. Scripture

The LORD instituted marriage in Paradise. We read about this in Genesis 2.

Gen 2:18-25

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 Lord God said that it was not good that man should be alone. He had no suitable helper. Not only to have fellowship, but also to fulfil the mandate to be fruitful and multiply. Since man cannot be fruitful and multiply all by himself, the LORD God made a helper fit for him. Together as husband and wife, as male and female, they can serve the Creator.

The LORD God also brought the woman to the man. The Form for Marriage concludes from this that also today the Lord gives husband and wife to one another. Since they are united by His hand, nothing shall separate them in this life. The answer of Adam to God's gift is:

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."

The conclusion is:

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

There are three elements to this conclusion: leaving, being united and, becoming one flesh. The fact that a man leaves his father and mother shows that a new stage in a person's life starts with marriage. This is not to say that parents have nothing to say anymore, but the husband's task is in the first place toward his wife. Together they are now a new family. The second element, "be united," indicates that marriage is a close and lasting bond. This unity is based on and expressed in the vow made at the time of marriage. The last element, becoming one flesh, shows the result of this belonging together, the two become one unit. The sexual union is one way in which this oneness is expressed and experienced.

Genesis 2 ends with the words that both man and woman were naked and not ashamed. God made them male and female. The difference in sexuality is therefore also a gift of God to be received from Him and to be enjoyed in thankfulness to Him.

God's beautiful creation was destroyed by man's fall into sin. This fall, as described in Genesis 3, has consequences for marriage. To mention some: Eve did not see her place as the one to follow, but took the lead. (1 Tim.2:14) Adam did not fulfil his task as head and stop his wife.

Genesis 3: 16, 17

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." To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.

After the fall into sin we see the terrible reality of the misuse of marriage, in polygamy, abuse, violence and divorce. The gift of sexuality is effected by the fall into sin as well. After Adam and Eve have eaten of the

tree they realize they were naked. They become ashamed. Sin warps and perverts the wonderful gift of sexuality. The LORD God gives clothing to Adam and Eve so they can continue to fulfil their task.

The LORD did not relinquish the gift of marriage and sexuality to the devil. His plan is to use the marriage bond to gather His church and increase His covenant. Marriage and sexuality are within the reach of His work of redemption. The LORD who redeems His people from bondage also said: "You shall not commit adultery." There are many other laws as well given to protect marriage and warn against the misuse of sexuality. Several of these laws can be found in Leviticus 18-22.

Lev. 18 : 6

" No one is to approach any close relative to have sexual relations. I am the LORD

Lev 18:22-24

Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable. Do not have sexual relations with an animal and defile yourself with it. A woman must not present herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it; that is a perversion. Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled.

Deut 22:5

A woman must not wear men's clothing, nor a man wear women's clothing, for the LORD your God detests anyone who does this.

Deut 23:18

You must not bring the earnings of a female prostitute or of a male prostitute into the house of the LORD your God to pay any vow, because the LORD your God detests them both.

In the wisdom literature of the Bible we hear (and sing) about marriage as well. There is the Song of Solomon, which is a love song. It is a song that speaks of this love and shows its depths and beauty.

Song of Songs 8:6-7

Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away. If one were to give all the wealth of his house for love, it would be utterly scorned.

In the Book of the Psalms love and marriage have a place as well. Psalm 45 is a love song made for the wedding of a king. Psalms 127 and 128 speak of the beauty of family life and the blessings of receiving children.

The book of Proverbs wants to teach God's people the fear of the LORD, also when it comes to marriage. We find in it warnings against the misuse of sexuality, as well the praise of a good woman. He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favour from the LORD. (18:22)

Proverbs 5 : 3-10

3 For the lips of an adulteress drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil;
4 but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword.
5 Her feet go down to death; her steps lead straight to the grave.
6 She gives no thought to the way of life; her paths are crooked, but she knows it not.
7 Now then, my sons, listen to me; do not turn aside from what I say.
8 Keep to a path far from her, do not go near the door of her house,
9 lest you give your best strength to others and your years to one who is cruel,
10 lest strangers feast on your wealth and your toil enrich another man's house.

Proverbs 5 : 15-19

15 Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well.
16 Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares
17 Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers.
18 May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.
19 A loving doe, a graceful deer-- may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love.

Prov 6:23-29

23 For these commands are a lamp, this teaching is a light, and the corrections of discipline are the way to life,
24 keeping you from the immoral woman, from the smooth tongue of the wayward wife.
25 Do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes,
26 for the prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread, and the adulteress preys upon your very life.
27 Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned?
28 Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched?

29	So is he who sleeps with another man's wife; no one who touches her will go unpunished.
Prov 7:4-7	
4	Say to wisdom, "You are my sister," and call understanding your kinsman;
5	they will keep you from the adulteress, from the wayward wife with her seductive words.
6	At the window of my house I looked out through the lattice.
7	I saw among the simple, I noticed among the young men, a youth who lacked judgment.
Prov. 19:14	
14	Houses and wealth are inherited from parents, but a prudent wife is from the LORD.
Prov 31:10	
10	A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies.
Prov 31:30	
30	Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.

In speaking through the prophets the LORD used the metaphor of marriage to describe His relation with Israel.

Ezek 16:8

"Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign LORD, and you became mine.

The prophets had to admonish the people of Israel on account of its unfaithfulness. Since marriage and sexuality falls within the reach of God's redemption, unfaithfulness to the LORD also has consequences for marriage. It is not for nothing that the LORD uses the image of a prostitute to describe unfaithful Israel. Many of the prophets exposed sins against the seventh commandment and called the people of Israel to repentance.

Ezek. 16 : 15

But you trusted in your beauty and used your fame to become a prostitute.

Hosea 1:2

When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, "Go take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD.

The prophets also used the image of marriage to describe God's faithfulness toward His people.

Hosea 2:14, 16

Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. In that day, declares the LORD, you will call me 'my husband.'

The last prophet of the Old Testament, Malachi, addresses the matter of marriage too.

Mal 2:13-16

Another thing you do: You flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, "Why?" It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not [the LORD] made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. "I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment," says the LORD Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.

In the days of Malachi, the men of Israel divorced their Jewish wives and married good looking pagan girls. (Similar situation can be found in Ezra and Nehemiah) For this reason the LORD does not want to receive the offerings of God's people anymore. He is displeased. And when the people ask why, the LORD answers that the people have broken their marriage covenant. Marriage is called a covenant. Marriage is a bond before the LORD, and to be understood within His covenant with Israel. This is also seen in the fact that the LORD speaks about the children. He wants the children of the covenant to grow up in the fear of His Name. But through these divorces and remarriages they grow up to serve the idols. The passage then also ends with the clear statement that God hates divorce.

The Lord Jesus Christ came to redeem this world from the dominion of sin. He does not abolish marriage, but places it again in its original setting. He also shows the depths of God's redemption.

Matt 5:27-32

"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into

hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

Matt 19:3-9

Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" "Haven't you read," he replied, "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." "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.

The Lord also forgave the sins of those who sinned against the seventh commandment.

John 8:7-12

When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

The apostles follow the teaching of the Lord Jesus. The redemption by Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit must rule marriage.

Heb 13:4

Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.

1 Pet 3:1-7

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 themselves 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. Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

The apostle Paul writes in several of his letters about marriage. In 1 Corinthians 7 and 11 he gives many instructions about the relationship between husband and wife. Other examples are:

Col 3:18-19

Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.

1 Tim 2:13-14

For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.

1 Tim. 4 : 3-5

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.

In the letter to the Ephesians Paul explains the mystery of the relationship between husband and wife in referring to the relationship between Christ and His church.

Eph 5:22-33

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.

We learn from this passage that the relationship between husband and wife must be in the Lord. As Christ is the Head of the Church so the husband is the head of his wife. As the Church has to submit to Christ so

the wife has to submit to the husband. As Christ's headship shows in self denial and sacrifice, so also the love of the husband must be self denying love.

The Bible teaches us that marriage is a temporary gift. On the new earth there will be no marriages anymore. The family unit will not longer be necessary for the total number of elect has been reached. This does not mean that we will lose something. On the contrary, the communion on the new earth will be perfect, that is better than we have on this earth and it will be for singles and married alike..

Matt. 22:30

At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage;

2. Confession/Church Order/Forms

2.1. Heidelberg Catechism

The Heidelberg Catechism deals with marriage in connection with the seventh commandment.

- Q. 108 What does the seventh commandment teach us?
 A. That all unchastity is cursed by God. We must therefore detest it from the heart and live chaste and disciplined lives, both within and outside of holy marriage.
- Q. 109 Does God in this commandment forbid nothing more than adultery and similar shameful sins?
 Since we, body and soul, are temples of the Holy Spirit, it is God's will that we keep ourselves pure and holy. Therefore He forbids all unchaste acts, gestures, words, thought, desires, and whatever may entice us to unchastity.

2.2. Church Order

The Church Order stipulates the following in Art. 63:

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.

2.3. Forms

The Form of Solemnization summarizes the Reformed teaching about marriage. Because Rome had made marriage a sacrament and forbade the priests to marry, the Reformed Churches had to teach the people the biblical approach to marriage.

See Van Rongen Our Reformed Church Service Book 1995, Inheritance Publications

Prayer # 2

O LORD, take us and our dear ones into Thy care and keeping. Watch over our families. Strengthen the expectant mothers and grant them a good delivery. Bless the bond between husbands and wives, and parents and children. Be with those married couples whom Thou, in Thy wisdom, dost not give children. Bless them and cause them to be a blessing in the midst of Thy household.

3. Purpose

The purpose of marriage is

- a. that 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.
- b. that 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.

The goal of the work of the overseers is to make sure that the members marry in the Lord as well that those who are married live in accordance with the Word of God.

4. How do we deal with mixed courtship?

The Lord instructs his people to marry "in the Lord" (1 Cor 7:39). The elders are instructed to ensure that this takes place (C.O. art 63). This instruction of the Lord applies to all who are married and who prepare for marriage. The Lord compares marriage to the relationship between him and the church (Eph 5). This teaches us how special the relationship between husband and wife is. It also teaches us that unity in the Lord is essential for marriage. Within this context the elders come to deal from time to time with the fact

that members start a relationship with a non-member. How do the elders have to approach this? What does the Bible teach? What do the elders have to say to those involved in this relationship? What is the place and function of the parents? This paper seeks to answer these questions, in the awareness that each situation is unique and that though we need clear guidelines at the same time we need wisdom to work with what the Lord teaches us.

Mixed courtships are not just the concern of the ward elders, but of the consistory as a whole. It will be important to be clear on the position of the consistory so that elders can draw one line when visiting and teaching. The congregation has to know too that consistory wants to be clear and consistent.

4.1 What do we mean with “mixed courtship”?

The words “mixed courtship” refer to a courtship of a member of the congregation with one who is not a member of a Canadian Reformed church or one of its sister churches. The non member can be a member of another church (e.g. Roman Catholic, Pentecostal) and have some understanding of the Bible, but can also be a person who is not at all affiliated with a church and has little to no knowledge of the Bible. The word “courtship” indicates that we are dealing with a relationship of love between a man and a woman. It is a relationship in which two want to get to know each other with as purpose to build a lasting relationship, i.e. marriage.

The bigger picture.

The pastoral attention for those who are in a “mixed courtship” is part of a larger picture. The larger picture is that the elders (and deacons) need to visit and extend their pastoral care to all couples who prepare for marriage. The instruction of the Lord to marry in him has many implication for all couples. Elders are not finished when both are members of the a Canadian Reformed church or a sister church. They have to address the faith life of the couple, how they show their love for the Lord in their relationship, the motivation for marriage, and how they as an engaged couple live with the Lord in their relationship, to mention a few items. Elders do well to have an open discussion about these matters with a couple that is dating and/or preparing for marriage.

The bigger picture includes sustained pastoral care for single members. It would not be proper that as long as the member is single the elders pay little attention, whereas as soon as a non-member comes into the picture, the elders come down hard on the member. It will be difficult to teach this member because the elders have not worked on establishing a trust relationship with this member. The pastoral care for single young members is extremely important.

The bigger picture of mixed courtship involves family and friends. At times the parents are aware of the relationship, at times they are not. The more they can be involved the better it is. The pastoral care over the families includes encouraging the parents to help their children live a life of obedience to the Lord. This involves also the question how to deal with (young) people we meet and work with who are not part of the church. How can we teach our children to stand up for their faith in these relationships? How can we encourage them to build relationships within the communion of saints?

4.2 Scripture

In this part we want to consider what the Bible teaches about mixed marriages. We will look at the Old Testament first and then focus on the New Testament.

Old Testament

In the first chapters of the Bible the LORD reveals that marriage is instituted by Him. Marriage is not a relationship between just two people, but is a relationship between a husband and a wife under the rule of the LORD God. Husband and wife are to live together in dependance on the LORD God. He uses marriage for His glory and His kingdom. The LORD God gave to husband and wife a mandate (Genesis

1:28). This mandate can be fulfilled in dependence on the LORD and being united in serving him. This instruction which we find in the first chapters of the Bible determines how husband and wife are to live in their marriage. It also determines the choice of a partner. Abraham was aware of this when he instructed his servant to find a wife for his son Isaac from among his own and not from among the Canaanites (Gen. 24). Rebecca says the same to her husband Isaac about Jacob their son (Gen.27:46). When Israel enters the land of Canaan the LORD makes very clear that he doesn't want the Israelites to intermarry with the Canaanites. In Deut.7:3-4 we read: "Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you."

True, there are examples of outsiders becoming part of Israel, think e.g. of Rahab (Joshua 2) and Ruth. The LORD is not opposed to others joining his people. It should be noted, however, that Rahab did not join Israel because she was in love with an Israelite man, but because she confessed her faith in the God of Israel. She put her trust in him and wanted to be part of his people. Ruth married an Israelite, but she too, upon going to the land of Israel confessed her faith in the LORD and showed it in her actions, and so received Boaz as a husband. The church is not opposed to others joining the church, but maintains that marriage is not a reason to join the church nor should courtship be seen as means to evangelize. A person joins the church in obedience to the call of the Lord. There instances in the Old Testament that men married non-Israelite women without this being condemned or leading to negative consequences. Moses e.g. married a non-Israelite. Israelites were allowed to marry women, virgins, they had captured from other nations (Deut 21). That was not forbidden, but the LORD voices His condemnation when these women do not let go of their religion and refuse to follow God's commandments.

The history of Israel shows that it did not listen to the LORD. The kings are a good example of this. How come Solomon ended up going the wrong way in the end of his life? Because of the foreign wives he had married. And what a misery did Ahab bring into Israel by marrying Jezebel. Ezra admits in his prayer that one of the reasons for the captivity was mixed marriages (Ezra 9). Mixed marriages is not a minor detail but a serious threat to the identity of God's people. This why both Ezra and Nehemiah are so appalled that after returning from Babylon the people fall back into the same sin. In Ezra 9 & 10 and Nehemiah 13 we read that the foreign women had to be sent away. The context also shows that these women were not willing to serve the LORD. They taught their children the language of their pagan culture. The LORD is concerned about next generation. He does not want his children to be taught the ways of the idols, but seeks godly offspring (Mal 2:14). For this reason he opposes mixed marriages.

New Testament

What does the New Testament teach about marriage and dating? After Pentecost the gospel went out into the world and many gentiles came to faith. It was not uncommon that one partner in a marriage would come to faith, but the other did not. From 1 Corinthians 7 we learn that this lead to questions. We get the impression that Paul is dealing with people who have been married for some time. They started their marriages as unbelievers, but because of their conversion find themselves in a marriage with an unbeliever. Does this mean that the marriage is it finished? The answer is No. Marriage is a deep bond, even when a believer finds himself married to an unbeliever, the marriage is not over. If the unbelieving partners is willing to respect the believer, they must stay together. In this context Paul says that the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband and the other way around. Who knows how the Lord may use this relationship? (See also 1 Peter 3:1) However, if the unbelieving partners makes serving the Lord impossible, then a separation can come about.

In the end of 1 Corinthians 7 the apostle addresses the question of a new marriage. The situation is that of a widow. She is allowed to marry anyone she wishes, but the new marriage must be in the Lord (vs.39). This instruction the church takes seriously, as we see e.g. in Art. 63 of the Church Order where we stipulate that the consistory has to "ensure that members marry only in the Lord."

What does the expression "in the Lord" indicate? To mention three aspects:

- the marriage relationship must be based on faith in the Lord;

John 15:4,5,7 "Remain in me, and I will remain in you. ... I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in Him, he will bear much fruit; ... If you remain in me and my words remain in you ..." To be "in" the Lord is to believe in him as the Christ of God.
- the marriage relationship must reflect the willingness to obey the Lord;

John writes "Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them" (1 John 3:24). This is also why the instructions for husbands and wives, parents and children are "in the Lord" (1 Cor.11:11; Eph.6:1; Col.3:18). Their obedience to these instructions shows that they are in the Lord.
- in all the trials they meet, husband and wife have to depend on the Lord.

In our fight against the schemes of the devil we need to be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power (Eph.6:10). This means that we must completely rely on him. "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain. (1 Cor.15:58) This dependence on the Lord shows in a humble attitude.

More aspects could be mentioned, but these three already show that believing in the Lord and obedience to the Lord is central for every Christian marriage. The instruction of art 63 C.O. is fully in line with this.

Another passage in the New Testament that highlights the importance of marriage is Ephesians 5:22-33. This passage highlights the "bigger picture," the unique relationship between Christ and the church. It teaches us that marrying "in the Lord" is fundamental for a Christian marriage. It is in Christ that we see our place as husband or wife. It is by the Spirit of Christ that we can obey these instructions. The teaching of the Bible is clear, we must marry in the Lord and the Lord is opposed to mixed marriages.

4.3. Objections

As they deal with mixed courtships, elders can run into several objections. A few are mentioned and addressed here.

Objection 1

"But I am not dating an unbeliever, he/she just happens to be non Canadian Reformed. What's wrong with that?" Or the non-member can challenge the elders, "do you mean that I am not a believer?" What do we do with this objection? What if the non-member claims to be a believer (though perhaps not going to church) or belongs to a church we do not recognize as faithful? Would we be opposed to such a relationship because we must marry in the Lord? Yes we would because to marry in the Lord indeed includes unity in church membership. We have to keep in mind that "in the Lord" involves obedience to the Lord, who is the Head of the Church. The New Testament speaks about the Lord Jesus as the Head of the Church. Christ even identifies himself with the Church. When Paul is stopped on his way to Damascus the Lord Jesus speaks to him and asks him, "Why are you persecuting me?" Paul was persecuting the church, but the Lord Jesus says that Paul is you are persecuting him. The church is the body of the Lord Jesus. There is a very close connection between Christ and the church. The church is the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. "In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord." (Eph.2:21) To marry in the Lord involves obedience to him. This obedience applies to every aspect of life. To use the words of Art. 28 BC, it is to submit ourselves to the instruction and discipline of the church, bend our "necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ, and serve the edification of the brothers and sisters ... as members of the same body." Unity in marriage is based on unity in obedience to the Lord. This unity comes out in being able to sit around the same Lord's Supper table. "There is one body and one Spirit ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph.4:4-6). "In the Lord" means belonging to Christ by true faith and showing this in serving the Lord as a living member of his church. Is this not what we promise when we

make public profession of faith? The fourth question in the Form for the Public Profession of Faith reads as follows: "Fourth, do you firmly resolve to commit your whole life to the Lord's service as a living member of his Church?" The formulation of this fourth promise shows that serving the Lord with your whole life cannot be separated from being a living member of the church. The choice of a partner for life is certainly part of serving the Lord, and thus also part of being a living member of the church. It goes against this promise to marry someone who is not a member of the church. The central point is obedience from the heart to this instructions of the Lord.

Objection 2

"The words of 1 Cor.7 speak of marriage not of courtship. Though marriage is wrong, dating is not. It can even be a way to bring someone to church." It is true that 1 Cor 7 speaks of marriage. We should be aware of this and not simply equate mixed marriage with mixed courtship. This does not mean, however, that these words have nothing to say for courtship. On the contrary, since courtship has marriage as goal, the words of 1 Cor 7 have consequences for (all) courtships. The text focusses on the point when the relationship becomes permanent and cannot be undone anymore. The implication is: let this goal determine how you look at and prepare for marriage, including the choice of a partner for life. come this far. The words of 1 Cor.7 are then also of great importance for teaching our children. The message has to come across very clearly that you should not build a lasting relationship with someone when you are not united in the Lord. The purpose of dating is not to bring someone to church, but to prepare for the task of, under his blessing, raising God's children. At the same time it is very well possible that by means of contact with a boy or girl in the church the Lord brings someone to the faith. In our approach we should not make this impossible.

Objection 3

"But there are others who did it and look their relationships turned out OK." Again it is true that there those who have joined in this way and have become faithful and reliable church members. We can be thankful that the Lord has led their lives this way. It must also be said that there are also those who have left the church because of a mixed courtship. However, numbers is not the point. We confess that nothing happens by chance. We also maintain that this does not take away our responsibility. What the LORD has determined in his (hidden) will is not our norm. He wants us to obey his revealed will. In Deut 29:29 the Lord makes this very clear.

At the same time we need to stress that the warning against mixed courtships is not to be seen and understood as a condemnation of all those who have joined the congregation after a mixed courtship. They are not second class members! When they joined, they were asked for the reason. We trust that it was for the right reason. A relationship with a boy or girl is no reason. The only reason is the willingness to obey the Lord Jesus. Once they join they are fully a part of the communion of the saints. The fact that they were received and welcomed into the congregation is not to be seen as an approval of their initial relationship. If the Lord uses a relationship that started in this way for a good purpose then we can be thankful for what He has given. At the same time this does not annul the clear command of the Lord. We have to obey the revealed will of the Lord. In preaching, teaching and home visits we have to keep on reminding the congregation of the revealed will of our God.

4.4 How to deal with it?

How are the elders to deal with a mixed courtship? The following points are meant to give direction to the approach of the consistory. First a few general points will be listed and then more specific.

1. Elder must be active and pro-active.

Consistory work tends to go rather slowly. Without wanting to delay the process, yet a few month can easily pass before a follow-up visit can be made. Visits have to be reported on and the Consistory meets

once per month. After this it can take time before the elders can meet again with the couple involved. In the meantime the relationship is developing. The sooner the elders deal with it and the more they are “on the ball” the better it is. The purpose of this paper is to help the elders in this, for it spells out the approach we would like to take. By agreeing to this paper, the elders can quicker address the matter. Having said this, the elders have to make sure that repeated visits take place for this will show either willingness or unwillingness.

Not only are the elders to be active, they have to be pro-active as well. By meeting regularly the single members in their ward the elders establish rapport with them. This can prevent delay in the process due to unfamiliarity. If an elder hardly ever meets a member but comes with strong admonitions when there is a courtship, the admonitions will not have the same affect as when there is a relationship of trust. The elders have to be pro-active in another way as well, in dealing with when visiting families with teen agers. Explaining what the Bible teaches about marriage and courtship will be helpful for later in life.

2. The teaching has to be clear.

The elders have to make clear that a mixed courtship is not in line with what the Lord requires. The preaching and catechism instruction has to explain this as well. As elders we have to address it when we visit the families in their homes. The teaching concerning marrying in the Lord is part and parcel of teaching that we have to live in the Lord. This starts at home with the parents. It starts at a very basic level, namely teaching children to build relationships with other that are “in the Lord.” This applies to the relationships at home between siblings, but also to friendships at school or in the neighbourhood. To give a consistent message is important and will help later on in life. To be more concrete, parents have to teach their children that in dealing with their friends in school or in the neighbourhood they have to put into practice what it means to be “in the Lord.” We do not teach that our children are better than others, but they have to learn to show in their lives that they belong to Jesus Christ. By baptism they are distinguished from the children of unbelievers (L.D. 27, q/a 74). Clear instruction on this can be very helpful for the rest of the child’s life. It also conveys a message about dating and courtship. You do not build a dating relationship with someone who is not one with you in the faith. The opposite is true as well. If parents give the message that there is no difference with others when it comes to neighbourhood and sports, then it becomes harder to understand why dating is out of the picture. The elders have to remind the parents of their duty in this regard and if need be, instruct the parents.

3. This teaching has to be applied in a pastoral way.

If we all obeyed the Lord the way we should, elders would not have to deal with difficult situations. However, we live in a broken world. This is not an excuse for sin, but we need to keep it in mind when dealing with a situation that is wrong and working towards correcting it. We have to be clear in our teaching and pastoral in our application of it. God himself gives the example in this regard. He never “watered down” his teaching and instruction for his people. At the same time he showed so much patience in working with his people. We know our God as the holy God. His law reveals his holiness. He revealed his will very clearly. We see this e.g. in the book of Deuteronomy. But we know him also as the God who keeps in mind that we are frail, and is willing to work with sinners like us. He is indeed slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The books of Judges, Samuel and Kings show how patient the LORD is. In the New Testament we see the same approach for example in Hebrews 5:11-14.

Certainly in the area of marriage the LORD allowed things in Israel, of which he himself says later, it shouldn’t have been that way. The Lord Jesus refers in that context to the hardness of their hearts. Growth in obedience doesn’t happen instantly, but takes time and patience. Yet in all of this the LORD did not change his teaching about marriage. What this means is that in preaching and teaching we have to be clear as what the Lord has revealed. At the same time we have to be patient and persistent in applying it. Patience in applying it is not a denial of the teachings of the Bible and patience may not obscure the direction the Lord gives in his Word. Patience recognizes that the congregation is not made up of perfect

people, but of sinners who have promised to live by the commands of the Lord. The willingness is not equally strong in all members. Elders have the task to encourage and stimulate this in a loving way. The question office bearers are faced with is, How do we in this situation work with all involved to bring about obedience to the teaching of the Lord?

4.5 The elders have to meet with all involved.

It is important to meet as soon as possible with a member who is in a mixed courtship. It is also important to meet with the parents as well as with the non-member. In these visits we have to be honest and open in a pastoral way.

The Member

The elders have to begin with making sure that their information is correct. If it is and the member is dating someone outside the church they have to find out whether the member is aware that a mixed courtship is not pleasing to the Lord. If the member is not aware of it, teaching and instruction is in place. The elders have to show the member what the Lord requires in his word. It has to be made clear that at this point the relationship is not "in the Lord." The relationship is not in line with what the Lord expects of a relationship. Does the member understand this and is the member willing to acknowledge this?

If the member is aware that the Lord is not pleased with a mixed courtship, the question is in place why the member has gone ahead, allowing his emotional relationship to go ahead of the relationship with the Lord. Personal feelings are placed before the demand of the Lord. It gives the impression that one will listen when he agrees and likes what he hears, but goes his own way when he doesn't like what the consistory says. This could be a reason for concern. In the first commandment we are demanded to forsake all creatures rather than to do the least thing against God's will (see Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 34). In the second commandment we are required to serve God in accordance to His word, and not in the way we think is best. The call of the Lord Jesus is radical: "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." (Matthew 10:37-38). When dealing with a communicant member the promises made at profession of faith can be brought into the discussion as well. Does the member that having this relationship goes against the promise made?

In meeting with the member, the elders will hopefully get a better understanding of the spiritual life of the member and the kind of relationship the member is involved in. Is the member willing to admit that it was wrong to start this relationship and is the member willing to bring this relationship in line with what the Lord asks? In this way the elders can hopefully also determine whether they should indicate that the relationship should be terminated. If there is not the willingness to admit wrong and to bring the relationship in line with what the Lord requires, then further admonitions are in place. This should not be left till a later point. The longer the relationship is in existence, the harder it can be to terminate it. Teaching and instructing with the Word of God is an essential part of these visits. It has to be clear to the members that what the elders require is what the Lord requires. Faith and the obedience of faith is worked by the Holy Spirit through the use of the Word.

The parents

The role of the parents is of such importance that when there is a relationship with a person who does not belong to the church, the elders should, if at all possible, involve the parents. Without question, this must be done when the child is a non-communicant member and still lives at home because the child is under the authority and responsibility of the parents. Involving the parents is also important when the child is a communicant member and still lives at home, though the elders will deal more directly with the child who is a communicant member and appeal to the promises made. If the child is no longer at home, the elders do well to have contact with the parents. Elders need the support of the parents, just as the parents need the

support of the elders. This will strengthen the instruction and admonition. The opposite is true too. If the parents do not teach their children "to marry only in the Lord" then the work of the elders becomes difficult. If the parents justify the actions of their children after the facts, the supervision by the elders becomes more difficult.

It is not uncommon that the consistory finds out about a courtship when it is already a fact and the parents, perhaps reluctantly, have already acquiesced to it. It can also happen that the parents are unaware of a relationship, but others in the family are, however, they do not make an issue of it. It is important to address this. Why were parents and/or family members not more vigilant? Why did they not involve the elders sooner? What can we do to encourage such vigilance? If the elders find out after the facts, it becomes difficult to convince a member not to enter into such a relationship. The relationship is already a fact and to demand that the relationship be terminated doesn't sound very friendly. As a result it can happen that the elders are expected to make the best of the situation, or even that they are blamed for a negative approach because they oppose the relationship. In all this we do well to realize that the cause of it all is that the member has entered into the relationship against the advice of elders and hopefully also parents.

The non member

A courtship involves two parties. Thus when a mixed courtship comes about the elders are no longer dealing with one but with two persons, though the second is not under their supervision. The non-member cannot be blamed for this relationship. We welcome guests to the church, also guests who come because they feel attracted to a young man or lady in the church. In dealing with our member and admonishing him, the impression can easily be given to the non member that we do not welcome him or her. To the person who is not a member the concerns of parents and elders may seem strange, even come across as a personal rejection or as a negative judgement on the non member's character. The elders have a task toward the non-member to assure that the latter is not the case and explain why they oppose this courtship. The person has to feel welcome in the worship services. The church has to make clear its willingness to teach and instruct the non-member.

Questions

Dealing with mixed courtships is a pastoral matter and will vary from situation to situation. Each visit and approach will be shaped by aspects that are specific to that situation, making it difficult to give general direction how to conduct these meetings. Yet some guidelines can be helpful.

1. It will be helpful to first get a good understanding of the situation:
 - Who is the other person?
age, family situation, work etc.
 - How did they meet each other?
This can tell you something about the persons and their relationship
 - How long has this relationship lasted?
Have the elders been kept in the dark for some time?
 - Is our member attending the church of the other?
 - Is the non member attending our services?

2. Questions about mixed courtships.
 - What does it mean that we must marry in the Lord?
 - Why is the Lord so opposed to mixed marriages?
 - Is the member aware of the position of the consistory?
If not - then teaching is in place
If yes - then why did you go ahead?
 - What did the parents teach?

- If the parents have warned against it, why go ahead?
 - Was advice asked from elders prior to beginning the relationship?
If no - why not?; If yes - why not follow it?
3. Now more specifically about the member who entered into this relationship
- Do you realize that what you did was not in line with what the Lord requires?
 - Does this grieve you?
 - Do you realize what you have done to the non-member?
 - Are you willing to bring your relationship in line with what the Lord requires? How can we do this?

4.5 Caution

As elders we have to be pastoral. To be pastoral includes to have an eye for the dynamics of the situation. Thus a few words of caution are in place:

- It is easy to end up in an adversarial situation. It is our task to keep the ways of communication open as much as possible.
- Let the Word of God speak, so that it doesn't come across as elders using their authority to enforce their rules.
- In dealing with the parents we have to be aware that it can be painful for parents to deal with the wrongs of their children. Parents can excuse or justify their child.
- We must be aware that as elders we may come across too mechanical or even rigid. It is easier to deal with someone else's child than your own. We have to be clear and firm, without making it impossible for the member involved to open up and admit wrong.
- We should be prepared to admit that we have not approached it in the best way or have come across in the wrong way.
- It can be that the relationship between this child and his parents has been strained in the past and the parents do not know how to approach their child. A rigid approach will not help to reach these parents and their child.
- The elder can be influenced in his view and approach by what has happened or is happening in his own family.
- Do not underestimate the emotions of a person who feels that there is no partner in the church, who has been hurt by previous situations or who feels that he or she may end up alone.
- Do not fall too quickly for the excuse, "We are only friends." A courtship has marriage as purpose.

All these elements show that we need to ask the Lord for wisdom and insight to deal with these situations in a way that pleases Him and benefits those involved.

4.6. Break it off?

Should elders say to a member in a mixed courtship that he has break off the relationship? We have to avoid easiness on two sides, easiness in simply forbidding any relationship and easiness in accepting whatever a member does. If there is no willingness to obey the Lord and to bring the relationship in line with his will, the elders may have to advise that the relationship be terminated. This is certainly the case when beside the mixed courtship there are other issues involved as well, e.g. church attendance or life style. If, however, there is willingness to become obedient then we have the task to work with this. In each situation the elders have to judge what is the best. It may be wise to ask the couple to slow down their relationship lest their emotions will run ahead of the process to show willingness to submit. Cooperation with the parents is essential in this regard.

If the non member indicates a willingness to submit to the discipline and instruction of the church, the elders have to work with this. The non member has to submit for the right reasons. It takes time to ascertain this. The elders have to give non member also a realistic opportunity to show his or her willingness. For example the elders can indicate that they will be monitoring the church attendance and in

their visits with the non-member will speak about the sermons. Other examples are instruction, involvement in church life, attending study societies. These suggestions have to be realistic, so that the non members feels a sincere willingness from our side that he or she becomes part of the congregation. It would also be helpful the involve the congregation in dealing with the couple. Inviting the non member should be encouraged and the name of the person made known to the congregation. Ongoing contact with the couple and encouraging contact with the congregation will help the non-member to feel at home and provide the support this couple needs. Under the blessing of the Lord we may together stand in awe of the wonderful mercy of our God and the ways by which he draws people into fellowship with him.

5. Marriage Course

As part of the preparations for marriage the couples participate in a marriage course. It can be done with several couples at the same time, or just with one couple. This course is usually taught by the minister. In case the church is vacant it could be done by elders as well. This course is part of their task to ensure that couples marry in the Lord.

The course could address the following:

1. Marriage
 - the meaning and purpose of marriage
 - Bible passages that speak about marriage
 - divorce?
2. Communication
 - what is communication?
 - importance of listening
 - how to deal with misunderstandings and problems in relationships
 - abuse
3. Family Life
 - explain the Banns
 - what is the function of a family
 - the extended family
 - task of husband and wife
 - aspects of family life:
 - family worship, atmosphere in the home, finances, work, entertainment, church, school.
4. Marriage and Sexuality
 - what does the Bible teach about sexuality?
 - connection between marriage and sexuality
 - marriage and children
 - honeymoon

6. Engagement and sexuality

We have seen that marriage is a precious gift of God and must be held in honour by all. It is a gift with a specific purpose. This has to be taught in church, by means of preaching and catechism instruction. It also has to be taught at home by the parents. We live in a society that is pre-occupied with sexuality and has no difficulty with marital unfaithfulness. In such an environment we must teach our children what God says in His Word about sexuality and marriage. As elders we should not be afraid to address this at the home visit. We may ask about the way the parents prepare their children for marriage and how they help them deal with the information that is available in the world. A question about the use of the media is not out of place.

Sexuality is a gift of the Lord. It must therefore be received and can be enjoyed in obedience to Him. Sin has destroyed so much when it comes to the use of sexuality. Sexuality includes more than sexual

intercourse. It involves how one deals with his own body and the body of the other. The Bible teaches that the sexual union between a man and a woman belongs to marriage. The marriage bond is the basis on which a man and a woman may give themselves to the other, and in which the conception of life can be received with thanksgiving. Couples who engage in pre-marital sex go against the will of the Lord. They rob themselves of something very special and have to deal with feelings of guilt and shame. Although contraceptives can prevent the conception of life, it does not change the fact that it robs the marriage of something very special. It is not enough to say that intercourse before marriage is wrong, we must also help our children deal with sexuality as a whole. That is especially the task of the parents. As overseers we can encourage the parents in this regard.

At times it happens that an unmarried couple expects a child. Usually the couple approaches the elders/minister to confess their sin. The elders must realize that there is a disciplinary aspect as well as a pastoral aspect to this. The disciplinary aspect deals with the sin and the repentance from sin. The pastoral aspect deals with how do handle the situation and guide the couple involved in a scriptural manner.

When dealing with such a couple it is important to ask direct and straight forward questions. It makes a difference whether we are dealing with a couple falling in sin after a long struggle, or a couple whose relationship centres around sexuality. In how far has this sin affected their mutual relationship? Has the one forced this on the other, for example? How have they brought this before the Lord? And how have they spoken about this with the parents? What does it mean to repent?

As elders we must keep in mind that it is easy to obtain contraceptives. This couple that has fallen into sin will perhaps be ridiculed by others who "played it safe". It is important to deal with this as well. The elders should not be naive. We may direct the couple to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. We all sin, we all have to learn to confess our sin. Then we may know that the relationship with the Lord is restored again.

The Church Order says that the consistory shall determine whether the benefit of the congregation requires that the repentance is announced. Since the results of this sin become public, it can be beneficial to announce both the sin and the names of those involved. The congregation may no hold the sin against this couple anymore. The importance and function of such an announcement should be discussed with the couple.

The question whether the two should get married should receive ample attention. Just because there has been sexual intercourse and life has been conceived does not automatically mean that a marriage has to follow. The basis of the marriage should not be the expectation of life, but the willingness to enter a marriage "in the Lord". Although it is preferable that the two marry, it can happen that they don't or that the marriage is postponed. The couple should be aware too that a marriage is not "of course".

7. The Wedding

7.1. Preparation for the wedding

The couple who plans to get married usually notifies the elders. The overseers have already spoken with the couple or will as yet do so, and if the report of that visit is positive they will indicate to the couple that they have no objections.

For the Reformed churches marriage not a sacrament. In the Reformation it was therefore no longer seen as a duty of the church but rather of the state to solemnize marriages. The church would ask a blessing over this. This was never fully realized in practise. Although it was a civil act, yet the church was involved. Under French occupation this changed, the solemnization became the responsibility of the state. The European countries, such as Great Britain (and its colonies) that were not subjected to French occupation

kept the practice as it was. This is why we still have it that the minister solemnizes marriages. In regard to the Canadian law, the ministers is authorized by the government to do this. As churches we have also stipulated that he can only do this when the consistory gives its approval. This also means that if a couple gets married before the justice of the peace the church will accept such a marriage as valid.

7.2. Banns

Two Sundays prior to the wedding the banns are announced. The civil law states that it must be done at least five days before the wedding in an official gathering. As churches we have the custom to announce the Banns two weeks in a row. If no objections are brought in the minister can sign the Form that indicates this. If the marriage takes place in a sister church, the consistory has to sign a form that functions as proof for the publication of the Banns.

7.3. Ceremony

The Church Order allows for the solemnization to take place in a private ceremony as well as in a church service. The majority of weddings are done in private ceremonies. If it were a church service the council would have an input in the order. As a private ceremony much of the order depends on the couple and the officiating minister. The ceremony consists of two essential parts, the address and the solemnization. In the address the word of God is explained and applied to the situation. Some ministers allow couples to choose the text, other ministers do not. During the ceremony the couple will receive a wedding Bible. The church to which the bride belongs is responsible for the wedding bible. It is given by the minister or by an elder.

7.4. Follow up

When the couple that is married leaves the congregation to take up residence elsewhere and join a sister church, no follow up is necessary. When the couple lives in this congregation, it is good to make a visit as ward elders to welcome them as a family in the ward some months after they are married. At this visit their involvement in the congregation and financial obligations can be discussed as well.

7.5. Miscellaneous

Many aspects of a wedding ceremony are coloured by culture and fashion. This is why you see changes over time as well. As such these changes do not have to be wrong. They too must be judged by the Word of God. At the same time we must be vigilant as well. To give two examples. A stag and doe is normal in our society. It is a fund raiser for the bridal couple organized by the best man or friends. It often involves drinking and dancing. It is starting to happen in our circles too, also involving excessive drinking, worldly music and dancing. Elders can address this in a visit with the couple prior to the wedding.

Another example is the need for a honeymoon. It is seen by many as an integral part of the wedding. This is fed by the media which likes to portray an unrealistic image of the honeymoon. Also among us it is more and more considered to be part of a wedding to go to far away places. The result is that the Sunday is often used for travelling or away from the church. Also this is something that should be addressed by the minister in the marriage course, or the elders at their visits.

8. Marriage and Children

The Bible speaks very highly about marriage. God gave marriage to mankind so that man would not be alone. The LORD also gave marriage to increase the human race. The Bible speaks no less highly about the gift of children as it does about the gift of marriage. The Bible teaches us that children are a gift from the LORD. Psalm 127 vs.3 reads: "Lo, sons are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward." And Psalm 128:3 says "Your wife will be like a fruitful vine, within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Lo, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD." Clearly children are seen as a gift from God.

Children are a gift from God because life is a gift from God. The beginning of each life is a miracle of God's almighty power. We know about this beginning more than previous generations because of the insights of medical science. That should make us stand in awe of the miracle of life even more. Modern man uses the knowledge of this beginning to control that beginning. Terms such as "planning," and "making children" are used. There is a danger in this. Life is and remains the gift of God. We confess the Holy Spirit to be the Lord and Giver of life. It is He who creates that beginning. It is not an accident, but His work.

God gave a helper to man, so that together they could fulfil the mandate of filling this earth. Indeed God could have taken stones and made children from them, but He did not. He ordained it this way. He would crown the love of husband and wife in the gift of children. Thus the human race is to be increased. God's providence involves the actions, the love of husband and wife. God also put boundaries in place here, e.g. in that the woman's childbearing years extend to a certain time of her life.

These children come into this world as helpless little creatures. If they would be left alone they would certainly die. A child needs parents. Thus the Lord in His wisdom made it so that a child would receive parents, first of all to take care of him, to feed him, to cloth him etc. But as the child grows up then the task expands to instructing, teaching, disciplining, and preparing him to function in God's creation. Normally speaking a child needs the protection of a home, the solid foundation of a marriage in order to grow up in the fear of the LORD. This is how the child will grow up to become a responsible person in church, and society.

In Israel the gift of children was also connected with the coming of Christ. In Paradise God has connected the coming redemption to the gift of children, for the seed of the woman would destroy the seed of the serpent. To have no children was a shame, for that meant that your family would not be there when the Messiah would come, and therefore the Lord made rules that if a man died without having children his brother had to marry his wife, or that if a man only had daughters the family name could continue through them. To mention one more example, the Lord stipulated that one who was recently married did not have to go into the army for a year, in this way he would not die without having raised a child.

We have dealt with marriage and with the gift of children. Now what about the connection between the two? Let's go back to the purpose of marriage. We saw there was a twofold purpose, namely, to be together and to receive children. Keep in mind that this is a twofold purpose. We are not talking about one purpose. If you enter marriage only to receive children and regard the being together as less important then you are mistaken. If you see the love between husband and wife only as a means to conceive children then you hurt your relationship. On the other hand we should not separate these two either, as if you can have the one but not the other, for then you separate what God in His wisdom has connected. The Lord gives love between husband and wife, and also gives the gift of sexuality to express this. At the same time He uses this intimate contact for the conception of new life.

The church of Rome has traditionally emphasized that the purpose of sexual intercourse is the conception of children. This leads to a negative approach to sexuality, as if that in itself is not good and can only be good when its purpose is the conception of new life. On the other hand, in our society it is very normal to want the pleasures of sexuality, but not the consequences or responsibilities of a new life. It is very easy to obtain contraceptives. The danger here is that sexuality becomes lust.

Since children are conceived through sexual intercourse, we should then also conclude that such intercourse is not proper for engaged couples, or for a boy and a girl that are going out. There is in that relationship no framework to receive a child, then a child should not be conceived either. God Himself tells this, a man shall leave his father and mother, cleave to his wife, and become one flesh, in that order. It is easy to prevent conception, there is the pill, condoms are easily available, and no one will know that

intercourse has taken place. God knows. He has given the gift of sexuality within the bond of marriage, when we separate what He has put together His gift will not be a blessing for us.

This connection between marriage and children as an order given by God also means that we believe that it is not right to want to be a single parent. Also that is happening in our world. A woman decides to have a baby, but does not want a husband. This will seriously harm our society.

How about it if you want to get married but do not think it wise to have children. There are many reasons given for this. To give an example, a couple has been going out for some years already. He is studying and cannot pay for a family at this point. To give up the study means to let go of a future career. She is earning an income to pay for his studies. If she would become pregnant she could no longer pay. To wait longer with marriage could lead to many frustrations or sinful practices. So why not marry and decide not to have children for a while. Another might say, my wife is just beginning her career, now to give this up and have children would be unfair, doesn't the Lord want us to use our talents.

Why is it that these questions come up today? It cannot be denied that previous generations did not deal with it, the way we do. Yet, they had their difficulties too. In fact if you compare, we have it better. We have better care, better housing etc. Could it be that the better we have it, the harder it becomes to trust in the Lord? Or, do we ask these questions because this is what we hear and read in the world that we live in? We are children of our time. Our society is very open, two children no more. It even legalizes abortion, the evidence of selfishness. Now we do not agree with what this world says and does, but yet some of this thinking we can take over, some of that selfishness. We may let the number of children be determined by what we regard as quality life. We must be aware of the wiles of the devil. It is good to discuss this question but also be prepared to say, that the reason for these questions could come from worldly ways of thinking. Sometimes we look too much at the answer, not enough at the question.

There is no text in the Bible that says you must have so many children, nor do we read that a couple may postpone the receiving of children for a while. Yet the teaching of the Bible is clear. Marriage and the conception of children are connected by God Himself. If we separate what God has joined together we must have good, biblical reasons. Reasons that can stand up before the Lord. The reasons given above are not good reasons. Though it may not be intended this way, they come down to selfishness, wanting the pleasures of marriage, but not the responsibility. The Bible says, marriage means to receive children, the Form for Marriage says the same. At a marriage it is even put in prayer before the Lord, "if it pleases Thee to give them children confirm Thy covenant to them and to their seed."

If a couple doesn't want to take the responsibility of receiving children then they should not marry. If they feel it is not proper to wait with marriage, then they should take the consequences and trust that with the help of the Lord we come through them. It may mean changing your studies for the time being, or it may mean to ask for financial help from family or other sources. When you enter marriage you do so in the confession of God's strength, then you may also rely on His help. When in the Form for Marriage we quote Ps. 128, blessed is every one who fears the LORD, who walks in His ways! You shall be happy and it shall be well with you, then we are dealing with the Word of God. Who would dare to say that these words are not true?

In the discussion about these matters you notice at times that the situation in a marriage is used to prove that a couple is allowed to say no to children in the beginning of their marriage. This comparison is not correct. The question whether you can enter marriage while not wanting to receive children, is a different question than when in a marriage we are faced with the question how to fulfil our responsibilities before the Lord. In the latter, not marrying is not an option anymore. It is too simplistic to put the two situations at the same level.

Also married couples have to realize that God has joined together the loving of each other and the receiving of children. Also they must realize that to receive children is a mandate. We should not be too quick in saying, sure we understand, you should not have anymore. The Bible speaks in so many ways about the blessing of children and the help He gives to those who rely upon Him. A married couple should also be aware of the pressures of this society, and let their thinking and deeds be ruled by God's Word.

Yet, it can happen that a married couple has to come to the conclusion that it would be better not to receive more children. This usually happens when the physical or mental condition of the woman is seriously effected. To come to this decision would require proper medical advice. It would be good also to involve the office-bearers of the church in this. If we stand right before God then it should be possible to speak about this with the servants of the Lord. There is no standard rule for office-bearers how to respond to this. It is a personal matter, a matter which the couple has to be able to face the Lord with their decisions. As office-bearers we can help them in this.

9. Being Single

To have to go through life alone is not easy, especially when others are married and have children. These single members can be easily hurt by insensitive comments made by those married. We are not referring to a teenager who doesn't have a boy or girl friend, but adult members in the congregation who do not have a husband or wife.

Although marriage is an institution of God which pleases Him, those who remain single their whole life are not disobedient. Under God's providential care it can happen that one never receives a partner. This is not necessarily their fault, but God's providence. When He places this on our road, He will give us His help as well. The thought that one may be left without a partner should never make one look for a partner outside the church.

In the second place although being single is not always easy, also single members of the church can have fulfilling lives. They are taken up within the church of Christ and there receive a task. In addition let us not forget that we are on the way to a new earth where marriage will not exist anymore. That means for us today, although marriage is a gift of God, you can also serve Him thankfully without it.

10. Marriage Difficulties and Divorce

We have seen the beauty of marriage. However, marriage is not always peaches and cream. There can be strife and confrontation. True, there are many marriages that are happy marriages, also when at times there are disagreements. There are also marriages where it seems impossible that husband and wife live together. There are marriages which have been broken.

Now every marriage has its ups and downs. The Form is quite realistic when it says those who are married will face trouble, experience difficulties and afflictions. It is not for nothing that husband and wife are told to heartily forgive each other their sins and shortcomings. We are sinful human beings, therefore no marriage relation will last, unless we daily repent and live from the grace of God. No marriage is perfect, because we are all imperfect. No husband and wife are truly compatible, the grace of God has to help us to remain faithful to our promises. The more we know ourselves to be sinners before God, the more we are willing to forgive the other. In case one of the partners is unwilling to forgive, the question is legitimate whether he or she sees his or her own sins. But every marriage has its difficulties. In a good, functional marriage the difficulties are overcome and even become stepping stones to a better understanding of each other. In a dysfunctional marriage the difficulties, though perhaps ignored, form a stumbling block and it bears the marriage down.

The Form for Marriage calls marriage a "state." The word state is not very current anymore, but it points to a position you have in life. Think e.g. of the previous centuries which knew different states in life, you had

the nobility, and the common people. Once you were born as a noble man you would always remain a noble man, that was your state in life, a place that was assigned to you. So also marriage is a state, it is a position which God assigns to husband and wife.

We stress this because all too easily can people approach marriage from the experience of the people involved, their love and dedication. Now certainly there should be love, but marriage is much more than a feeling of belonging together. It is a state of belonging together. A state does not depend on what I like or don't like about it, but on what God demands. As long as you are not married no one forces you to love the other. This changes when you enter the state of marriage. Then you come under the command to love each other. It becomes your duty.

In practice this means that husband and wife have to make it a conscious effort to love the other. To be faithful to each other does not come by itself. Their aim may not be to get as much as possible, but to give as much as possible, for then you will receive in return. This is why it can be wrong to ask the question whether two love each other when they have major problems in their marriage. It might be better to ask whether they are committed to their vows and are willing to live according to what they have sworn. And when they feel that the love is not as strong anymore as before, then together they must work towards growth. This is our duty. Of course you can only do this when together you bow before our Father in heaven. For as heirs of His grace we will receive His aid and protection, even when we least expect it.

The command to love is something the world cannot understand. It sees love simply as an emotion. You cannot command it. If it is there, fine, if it isn't, then you separate, or divorce. It does not take much to be divorced from your spouse. As believers we become more and more confronted with the question, are we allowed to divorce when it doesn't work anymore? The answer is very simply. The Bible clearly indicates that God hates divorce. Marriage is not a temporary agreement, but a lifelong bond. Why would we otherwise pledge that we will love the other and be faithful to him or her, for as long as we shall live? And the question whether divorce for certain reasons is allowed really bypasses the main thrust of God's Word. God loves marriage too much to give us a whole list of regulations in His Word on which basis we can divorce. With all discussions about divorce we should always remember, God hates it. He hates it so much that if it happens that two persons end up be separate they are not allowed to marry again. Paul says they must remain separate or be reconciled. Paul bases this on the teachings of our Lord which we find in Matthew 19. What God has joined together, let no man put asunder. And whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery.

The Pharisees come to the Lord Jesus to test Him, and ask Him whether it is permissible to divorce your wife. The Lord plainly says No. When God brings two people together, who can separate them? Only God, by death. The Pharisees have their answer ready. Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to put her away?

But the Pharisees misused Moses. Notice what the Lord answers: Moses allowed divorce because of your hardness of heart. The Pharisees said Moses commanded this certificate of divorce, the Lord answers, He allowed it. That means it was in existence already. Moses left it, for the sake of the hardness of heart. It is a shame that it had to be allowed. This brings us to Deuteronomy 24: 1 - 4. When you read these verses carefully then you will find that the main part of the sentence is at the end, the former husband may not remarry his former wife. A return is impossible, after she has become the wife of another. Moses does not make a command regarding this letter. He was confronted with the terrible reality that people divorced and did as if marriage could be broken at any time. Moses knew he could not change this overnight. Therefore the LORD gave rules to control a chaotic situation. Indeed that law was there. But says the Lord Jesus, it should never have been there. From the beginning it was not so. God hates divorce. He showed that also in Dt. 24 when He limits divorce as much as possible. The Pharisees misused this rule. The opening Moses allowed they saw as an opportunity to end marriages. But Christ brings His people back to that beginning: no divorce, no second marriage.

The Lord says more, whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, except for unchastity, or adultery. The Lord gives an exception to the rule that speaks about divorce and remarriage. The whole matter is different when you are dealing with adultery. In the Old Testament adultery was punished by death. The Lord so ended one's life and marriage by death. Why such severe punishment? Because marriage is such an intimate relationship. To have a sexual relationship with a third party breaks the marriage. It was customary in the days of the Lord to use the certificate of divorce for adultery. The death penalty was not used anymore. Christ still says, in case of adultery you marriage is broken so completely that a divorce and remarriage is permissible.

On the basis of this the Reformed Churches have always maintained that adultery can result in divorce and the so-called innocent party is allowed to remarry. It can result. It does not have to. It is always better to be reconciled with each other. Also after adultery has been committed. Think of the comparison of Eph. 5. Husband and wife are compared to Christ and His Church. How often did not the LORD receive his Bride back after she had committed adultery with other gods? In addition, we should be careful in using the expression "innocent party" because often it very difficult to say who is guilty and who is innocent. The man who commits adultery can do so because his wife ignores him.

Within the Reformed tradition there is also another situation in which divorce and remarriage can be permitted, when one of the partners is an unbeliever. To be more precise when the unbelieving partner demands from the believer to give up the faith, or walks away because he or she cannot live with a believer. Paul says in 1 Cor 7, such a person is not bound. As long as the unbelieving party agrees to live together then you must stay together, but if it becomes impossible to live your life as a child of the Lord, the believer is not bound. There is disagreement about this word "not bound." Some say it means she is free of the man and can remarry. Others believe that it means the believers should not become a slave of the unbeliever, let him or her go.

We may conclude the following: Marriage cannot be broken by husband or wife. Only death separates them. God hates divorce. He commands love and faithfulness. When there are problems in marriage husband and wife have to bow before the command of God. Do we then ask the impossible? No, for God never asks from us, what He does not promise to us, first of all. If it does not work then this is never to be attributed to a lack of God's grace, but to the stubbornness of our sinful nature. God has promised His help, and therefore we can fulfil His will. Yet it can happen that two persons cannot live together, in spite of their own willingness and all attempts to bring them together fail, and thus, end up separate. This is wrong, but at times there is no other way because of the brokenness of this world. However, these two are not allowed to remarry.

The elders of the church will be involved in such broken situations. They have to show pastoral care, be prepared to teach what a Christian marriage is all about and admonish if need be. For if husband or wife are unwilling to be reconciled discipline has to be applied on the basis of the sixth commandment. Also when two divorce whereas there is no adultery involved the church is called to admonish and call to repentance. Also incase the civil court pronounce two people divorced this does not mean that the church has to accept this. Then there is still the call to repent.

11. Our Place as Office-bearers

How do we as office-bearers have to deal with all this? We have to start with recognizing our limitations. We are office-bearers and not marriage counsellors. We have to be willing to refer couples to professionals. At the same time we have to see our strength. The Lord Jesus has entrusted us with the keys of His kingdom. We help, encourage or admonish with the Word of God.

As office-bearers we come to deal with marriage problems in one way or another. Often we get involved too late. This happens, because we do not know about it, because we are not sensitive to the symptoms, or because the people involved still cover up the problems. However, once we become aware of the problem, we are expected to solve it. At times when you try to help you get part of the blame too yet. On the whole it is best in a marriage dispute that we try to remain as neutral as possible. We do not help the couple with our immediate judgements about their disagreements, unless of course an obvious violation of God's law is involved. Laying blame is an easy way to evade the real problem. The two involved have to learn to communicate, to respect each other and understand each other.

Marriage trouble can also cause trouble in the consistory, perhaps of family relationships, or other ways. Marriage trouble can cause friction between churches, the one consistory will allow things the other does not. People with marriage problems tend to move from one congregation to the next. In addition, as office-bearers we should be careful that the troubles do not affect our own marriages. Seeing and hearing so much trouble should not take the joy out of our own relations. Nor, should we become cynical. We know it so well when it comes to others, but don't live up to it in our own marriages. In both instances we must realize that the key to a good relationship is not that we makes no mistakes, but that we live from the grace of God.

Our task as office-bearer starts already before marriage. Troubles in marriage often go back to difficulties in the engagement time. Our task is to make parents aware of how to talk with their teenage children, as well as speaking to couples ourselves. A home visit for a couple is not a luxury. In these discussions we should speak about their relationship, their perception and understanding of each other, and what binds them together. We must speak about the worship of God, prayer and studying God's Word. The desire to begin marriage in the Name of the Lord must be a real desire. We must speak about the command to love that comes in marriage, that God hates divorce, about the headship of man, the command to be fruitful and multiply. Though not always easy, also the sexual aspect of the marriage must be discussed. Troubles in marriage have roots also in the sexual relationship. Premarital sex is disastrous for a relationship.

The married couples need our help and encouragement as well. Prevention is also the best medicine here. When just married the couple has time for each other, but when they receive children then it can become too difficult and busy to have time for each other. Career can cause friction, as well as the upbringing of the children. In our home visits we should not be afraid to ask specific questions about the marriage. If the marriage is good they will appreciate these questions. If they refuse to answer, then there is something wrong.

How do we deal with situations where there are troubles? The first thing is listen and try to understand the situation. This means before saying what you think should be done, listen, and listen to both sides, try to place yourself into the other's situation and what makes them reason the way they do. Are they indeed disagreeing about the real issue, or is there a deeper problem in this marriage? In dealing with difficulties the Word of the Lord must be clearly applied. Marriage is a life long bond. God requires that husband and wife love each other and should be willing to forgive each other. We may tell them that to love each other, that is to live according to the promises that we have made. In case of a major rift we have to see whether from both sides there is willingness to work towards reconciliation. This reconciliation can take time but the willingness must be there, in line with the sixth commandment.

What is not allowed, nevertheless does happen. A husband and wife may end up separate. In light of 1 Cor. 7 we must say that this is wrong. That does not mean that we cannot have understanding for a situation, nor does it mean that we use the Word of God as a whip to put them together again. It may need a lot of wisdom, time. Even then it can happen that we come to the conclusion that the situation is unbearable and the partners must remain separate. Both should promise not to seek divorce, but use the time to work towards reconciliation.

Husband and wife must see their relationship as being "in the Lord." Problems in marriage are often related to problems in their lives with the Lord. Unwillingness to repent, hatred and anger, are often related to not seeing one's own sins before God. It is mandatory that as office-bearers we ask husband and wife how they see their relationship between them and God. We are not saying, if you believe all your problems will be solved, thus if you still have problems your faith is not strong enough. We put it the other way around, problems between two humans has often a deeper root, namely a problem in the communication with God. Do the husband and the wife see their place in marriage as a place before the Lord?

With regard to abuse in marriage, see chapter 3 - 4

Marriage is an institution of God. It is a wonderful gift of our Lord. However, our sins so often come in the way. Nevertheless the Lord does not demand the impossible when He says that marriage is a life long bond. Life long faithfulness is possible for those who live from God's grace, who daily confess their sins, who focus their eyes on the promises of Christ and His coming. They know that we are on the way to a new earth where there will be no marriage anymore, where we will celebrate the marriage feast of the Lamb.

12. Evaluation

- What are we doing as office-bearers to promote the honourable place of marriage?
- How do we speak about marriage at home visits?
- How do the parents instruct their children in regard to marriage and sexuality? What can we do to help them?
- Are there concerns with regard to the mandate to be fruitful and multiply?
- Are we vigilant enough when it comes to mixed courtships?
- Is there a marriage course in place? Does it cover the necessary areas? Do the couples participate in them? Are there any suggestions?
- Are there items you want to bring to the attention of the meeting? Why? What should be done about them?

13. Literature

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