

*CHAPTER I*

*CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE*

by

James Visscher

**Introduction**

The two topics that I have been requested to deal with, Christian marriage and the Christian family, are very current, controversial and crucial.

At the same time though it has to be said that these subjects are also very extensive. A great deal of research has been and is being done on both. Much has been written and continues to be published on them. Also from a Christian perspective, one can cite a long list of publications possessing various degrees of sophistication and value. In short, we are not exactly engaged in pioneering work this evening.

Having said this, I will now turn to the first of my two topics, namely Christian Marriage.

**Approaching the Matter**

The first question that needs to be addressed is the one that deals with approach. How does one deal with a subject so gen-

eral, so varied and so loaded as Christian marriage? I will do it out of the perspective of Genesis 2:24 where it says, "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh." Why this verse? Because, as I reflected on how to tie all of the aspects of this diverse subject together into a cohesive presentation, it came to me that here is a portion of Holy Writ that touches on all the major areas of a Christian marriage. In it we are told about the process of leaving the parental home, cleaving to each other in the marriage state and weaving two lives together into a magnificent and mysterious unity.

Besides, it is also noteworthy that this particular verse of Genesis about marriage is the one that is most frequently cited in the Bible itself. It is referred to in Matthew 19:5; Mark 10:7,8; 1 Corinthians 6:16 and Ephesians 5:31. The Lord Jesus makes reference to it in one of His controversies with the Pharisees about the matter of marriage and divorce. The apostle Paul quotes it in connection with his warning about immorality and his discourse comparing marriage to the relationship between Christ and the church.

Hence we turn first of all to the matter of "leaving".

## **I. THE FIRST STEP OF MARRIAGE - LEAVING**

What is all contained in the words "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother"? Perhaps you are tempted to say, "Not too much. It's simply a summons for a man (woman) to pack his (her) bags and move out." Nevertheless, there is more involved, much more. For one does not leave just like that.

### **A. Preparing to Leave**

When a young man or woman leaves the parental home there is the hidden assumption that he or she will be prepared for this moment of leaving. The parents will have seen it coming already

for some time and will have done their utmost to make it a successful departure. The man or woman too will have seen it coming and prepared personally for it.

But how do parents prepare a child to leave home and to enter the married state? Perhaps it should first be said that there are many parents who do not prepare either their offspring or themselves for the moment of parting. They simply allow life to take its course. They permit events to carry them along and assume that their son or daughter will find his or her own way. Sometimes all the preparation they do is save and set aside some money for their share of the wedding expenses, or arrange some financing for it.

Such an approach, however, is to be classified as being biblically deficient. Christian parents have a duty to take a much broader and longer look at this whole matter. Already before and when children are born parents have to devote some time and attention to their plans, intentions and expectations for their children.

I realize full well that parents of young children do not consider themselves to be already involved in a marriage training program; however, they must surely be aware that they are involved in a *life* training program. The Lord expects them to immerse themselves right away in the "training business". As soon as possible our children are to be taught His ways, His standards, His truths. They are to be taught with a view to eventually assuming their proper place in life. To live and function as a true member of the church, as a real citizen of the kingdom, as a responsible member of society and as a potential parent, all of that requires training - early training and long training.

### ***The Parental Training School***

Where is the main training ground? In the home and in its extension, the school! It is in the home that a child learns the ba-

sic lessons of belief and commitment, behaviour and conduct. Proverbs 22:6 reminds us: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." Parents have a calling to train their children in matters of faith and life.

With respect to matters of faith, they must continually remind their children of the covenantal context of their life, namely that they live as children of the Lord in a relationship of promise and demand. With joy and thankfulness parents should remind their children of the glories of God's promises to them. With seriousness and insistence parents must call on their children to make these promises their own through faith in the Triune God and to live up to the demands that flow forth from them.

At the same time it is important that parents impress upon their children the need to live a life that is in harmony with God's promises and blessings. A life of holiness is not optional. The fruits of the Spirit are not to be tossed aside or to be handled selectively but to be taken together and incorporated into one's entire life.

In addition to life commitments and life conduct, parents also have a task to have their children trained in life skills at schools that reflect their faith and confession. If your son or daughter is going to be able to function properly later on in life there is a need to develop their talents in a disciplined and systematic fashion and from a Christian perspective.

In short, then, parents have a calling to prepare their children for life, and that means for all the challenges of life in the church community, in the kingdom, in society and in marriage. They must teach and train their children to this end. They must also do this in a credible manner. What that means is that our talk and our walk must be in harmony. Father and mother can not properly train their children in the ways of God's covenant if they yawn at its promises and neglect its demands. They can not demand holiness from their children if they manifest no holiness in their own lives. They can not expect to have their children's talents shaped

and moulded for service if they choose a secular instrument or school to do the shaping and the moulding. Consistency is fundamental.

An example is paramount as well. By this I also mean the example that your marriage sets for your children. Is your marriage the kind that your children can learn from and will later strive to imitate? Is it characterized by obedience to God's will? How do you treat your wife? How do you treat your husband? What's the chemistry like between you? Children often sense and see, learn and mimic what they have seen their parents do; hence it is of the utmost importance that the parental marriage be sound.

### ***The Personal Training School***

Still, a proper preparation for marriage is not only a matter of parental example and home environment; it is also a personal matter. What I mean by that is that every young man or woman also has a duty to train him or herself. In this respect we can speak of training in three areas:

#### **1. training in godliness**

Contrary to what some of you may assume this is not just a reference to being prim and proper; it has to do with the entirety of one's godly walk (read 1 Tim. 4:7). A Christian who is preparing for marriage must examine his faith commitment to God, his Bible study, his prayer life, his worship, his witness, his conduct of life, and bring them into conformity with God's will. He or she must bring their dating practices in line with what God wants, and that means no mixed courtships (read 2 Cor. 6:14ff).

#### **2. training in inter-personal skills**

Seeing that marriage is a matter of relationship it is important that relational skills, such as communication, sharing, listening, understanding and others be developed. It is just not good

enough to say that later one will put these kinds of things into practice. Courtship and engagement times are apprenticeship times.

### **3. training for occupational skills**

The Marriage Form speaks about a husband being able to support his family and those in need. As well it assumes that a wife will care for her family properly. Both of these aspects are thus connected to the matter of skills. A young man who has marriage plans must realize that marriage is more than a bed of roses, it is also a hive of financial commitments and responsibilities. To prepare for them he should develop his talents to the fullest.

In this regard I lament the fact that so many young men fail to do that and that they are content to live a life of the lowest denominator. Unlike so many I think that we must stop looking at occupations hierarchically and start regarding them horizontally. By that I mean that a carpenter is not inferior to a lawyer and a labourer is not inferior to a doctor. What is important is that each person develops their particular talents and aptitudes to the fullest. In God's kingdom all work has value.

Therefore, young men should enter marriage as skilled people and not as indifferent coasters. Young women should enter it not as innocent, uneducated females but as those who have developed not just their household skills but also their life's skills generally.

## **B. The Reason for Leaving**

Leaving the parental home and entering marriage, however, requires not only proper preparation, it is also presupposes that there is a reason for doing so. In other words, why leave and get married? The secular response is usually negative or sociological or both. Children leave home and get married because they are

tired of being told what to do, because they want greater freedom to operate, because they want a change of scenery, because they have progressed to a certain stage in their personal development, because they want to share life's intimacies with someone else.

Biblically speaking the rationale is different. For the Word of God says that the reason for marriage is to be found in man's very make-up and in God's response to it. Genesis 1 and 2 reveal that God made man good and gave him a splendid occupation, but that man in the exercise of that occupation (office and calling) soon experienced certain problems. In Genesis 2:18 the Lord God is quoted as saying, "It is not good that the man should be alone." Here we come across the first negative in creation - the first "not good". And it has to do with the fact that man has no one whom he can really relate to. He has worked with the animals; he has observed them; he has seen how they were paired off. He has had a certain kind of fellowship with them.

### ***Man's Loneliness***

But it is not sufficient. Man is lonely, incomplete - somehow, out of sorts - even. God sees this and God responds to man's need in a most wonderful way. God creates a helpmeet for Adam, a woman, a partner, a wife. It is in this way that God reacts to man's loneliness and incompleteness.

Yes, and Adam obviously agrees. When he sees Eve for the first time, he responds with enthusiasm and with poetry. "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man" (Gen. 2:23). He identifies with her immediately. He sees her as an extension of himself. He regards her as a cure to what ails him.

Here then we have the first reason for marriage. It is God's answer to man's need for fellowship and companionship. Men - most men anyway - are not meant to go it alone. Left to themselves they experience a sense of disjointedness and isolation. They need a counterpart.

### ***Marriage Fruitfulness***

If loneliness and incompleteness constitute the first reason for marriage, then the need to continue the human race with a view to exercising proper dominion is another. In Genesis 1:28 it says, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it". Obviously this charge is given to the marriage partners in a certain setting and context. At that time they were the only humans and they needed to supplement their numbers. Some would argue that today the numbers are high enough and that it is time for a drastic cut-back.

In this connection, a number of aspects need to be noted. Firstly, the receiving of children is always a blessing of the Lord. Think of Psalm 127 and 128 where sons are called a "heritage", where the fruit of the womb is considered to be a "reward", where you are considered "happy" if you have a quiver full of children, where you are regarded as "blessed" if your wife is like a fruitful vine and your children are like olive shoots. Interestingly in these Psalms blessings are not related to things but to people. The blessed man is not one who has all kinds of wealth and property, but who has a good wife and some well-adjusted children.

Secondly, nowhere in the Bible do we receive a target number as far as children is concerned. A colleague of mine once suggested that a "quiver" means six. The only problem with that conclusion is that it is not based on anything concrete. I responded by saying that it all depends on the size of the quiver—there are large, medium and small ones. And then too there are marriages where the quiver remains empty.

If one is able to have children, the question of number is not a matter of minimum or maximum but of optimum. Those who believe in the minimum approach are often governed by personal desires and selfishness. Those who are governed by the maximum often do so at the cost of the wife's health and the family's well-being. God expects us to act in a responsible fashion, also in

this matter of having children. Factors of physical and mental health, of age both of parents and children, of living conditions, need to be taken into account.

### **C. The Repercussions of Leaving**

Hence it is that we leave the parental home behind, but what does it mean to "leave"? Perhaps this question is best answered by means of a series of negative and positive statements.

#### *Negatively*

To "leave" does not mean that a young man or woman now has a duty to utterly abandon or forsake their parents. Such a course of action would be at odds with the message of the Fifth Commandment. Neither does it mean that you have to move to the other side of town or of the country. To "leave" may have a physical component but that does not exhaust its meaning.

#### *Positively*

To "leave" means that our relationship with our parents changes and becomes more adult in orientation. It means that we now make it a point to pay first and primary heed to our spouse's opinions, desires and needs. It means that the prime source of our affection is no longer that of father and mother but of our husband or our wife. It means that we think for ourselves, accept responsibility for our own actions, and dare to make decisions together as husband and wife. In short, to "leave" means that we exchange a son-parent relationship or a daughter-parent relationship for a husband-wife relationship.

## **II. THE SECOND STEP OF MARRIAGE - CLEAVING**

If "leaving" then is the first step, what about "cleaving"? What is meant when Genesis 2:24 says that "a man... cleaves to

his wife"? The actual meaning of the word "cleave" means the same as to cling to, to become stuck on, to become glued to. It presupposes that two separate entities somehow come together, attach to one another, and so become inseparable.

### **A. Different People**

In defining the word "cleave" in this way and in exploring its meaning, we must realize that cleaving is not describing a merger of two completely similar parts. That which cleaves together is described as being a merger of male and female. What God made for Adam was not another man but a Woman. When God brought Eve to Adam He was bringing her not to another woman but to a Man.

Why say this? Is it not self-evident? No longer! At one time to say this was to say the obvious, but today there is a great deal of confusion not only about marriage as an institution but also about the parties who can enter into a marriage union. To listen to some homosexuals speak one would have to assume that what God made for Adam was not Eve but Steve. The biblical account refutes this and condemns homosexual practice as sin and homosexual marriage as an absurdity.

It insists that what God made for the man was not a duplicate of himself. True, Eve comes from man. She is made from his side but she is not a carbon copy of him. There is both similarity and dissimilarity present here. And that too is a rather self-evident truth. Physically, emotionally and mentally there are differences between male and female. I realize that the feminist movement disagrees with much of this and is busy trying to convince us that the differences are actually non-existent. It assumes that "different" means "inferior" and should therefore be routed out.

Nevertheless, the Bible would dispute this. As a matter of fact it would have us not only recognize the differences between male and female, but also appreciate and applaud them. Here, after all,

is God's creative wisdom at work. What He makes for man is someone who will fill in the void, someone who will complement him, someone who will make him complete in every way. This is a marvelous thing and an exciting thing. It's something that men should recognize and not try to suppress. For that is sometimes what happens. There are silly men out there who want their wives to act, to think, to talk, to feel, to react like they do. There are silly women out there who want their husbands to be just like they are. Such an attitude and approach is wrong-headed and it is guaranteed to produce endless frustration. It places one in conflict with what God has made.

## **B. Different Roles**

Still this matter of difference between the male and the female is not just physical and emotional, but within the context of marriage it also represents a difference in role and function. If one carefully scrutinizes such main chapters as 1 Corinthians 11; Ephesians 5; 1 Timothy 3; 1 Peter 3, then a number of conclusions must be drawn about the role of the husband.

### ***The Role and Responsibility of the Husband***

#### **1. The Husband as Head**

In the first place, we see there that the Bible often refers to the man as being the "head" of his wife. What does that mean? For some years now a fierce theological debate has been waged in evangelical circles as to whether the word "head" is to be understood in the sense of "source, origin" or "authority over". The traditional interpretation has always favoured the latter explanation; however, in recent times certain scholars have been busy championing the former. Without getting us involved in all of the linguistic and hermeneutical questions, I would say that the work done by Dr. Wayne Grudem in this area, and available in the

book *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* is most convincing in support of the view that "head" means "ruler or authority over". To speak of the husband as the head of his wife (Eph. 5:23) may sound rather old-fashioned to many in these days of feminism, but it is a biblical teaching to be respected by all believers.

## **2. The Husband as Servant**

In the second place, we must realize that the biblical concept of headship or leadership is to be seen in the context of servanthood. When the world hears the word "head" or "ruler" or "leader", it immediately thinks of some sort of power hungry, self-centered egotistical tyrant. When the Bible, however, uses the word "head" it never allows us to separate leadership from service. The Lord Jesus Himself said to His disciples, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave" (Matt. 20:25-27). One can also think of that graphic example of servanthood which our Lord gave when He washed the feet of His disciples. After which He says to these men who will soon lead His church "I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (Jn. 13:15). Yes, and Paul's words in Ephesians 5 drive the point home even more. There the husband is to model his conduct after Christ. He came as a servant; He came to give His life as a ransom for many; He came for the welfare of His church. Whatever Christ does, He does for our sake. And a husband must do the same for his wife. He must consider her well-being to be paramount.

## **3. The Husband as Lover**

In the third place, it is not enough for the husband to be the servant-head, he must also be the lover. In Ephesians 5:25ff. the

apostle Paul makes it abundantly clear that if submission is to be the hallmark of the wife, love is to be the hallmark of the husband. Indeed, in the verses 25-33 he repeats this command four times.

Why? He does not say it specifically but surely we are to take the hint and realize that the Spirit is saying something to us here about the very nature of the male or husband. It is that a man tends to be rather self-centered. He is very adept at taking care of his own interests, wants, desires, pleasures. A man can work all day and sometimes half the night and still be satisfied with his life. A man often pursues things which he enjoys like sports-hockey, fishing, and golf- with a mindless passion and a disregard for others, especially his wife and children.

It is in light of such a disposition that the apostle Paul is led to place on the shoulders of the husband this command to love his wife. She, of course, is to love him too, but the Scriptures make it abundantly clear that the prime burden in this regard is his.

### ***The Role and Responsibility of the Wife***

But, if the husband's primary task is to love his wife, what is her primary task over against her husband? Here once again the apostle Paul, as well as the apostle Peter, give us a clear answer. The wife has as her primary calling a duty to submit. Peter says, "Likewise you wives, be submissive to your husbands..." (1 Pet. 3:1). Paul says, "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord" (Eph. 5:22).

Before we answer the question as to what this means or does not mean, we should first give some attention to *why* this is commanded of the wife in the first place? Why must she submit? The best answer that I have heard to this question comes from the pen of a female scholar called Susan Foh who argues that this calling of the wife is rooted in the Fall.<sup>1</sup> In Genesis 3:16 God says to the

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<sup>1</sup> *Westminster Theological Journal*, XXXVII, No.3 (Spring 1975) pp. 376-383.

woman, "...your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." The pivotal question here is "what is meant by the woman's desire?" Foh states that this is not a reference to a woman's sexual desire or to a woman being somehow psychologically dependent on a man. Rather she shows that the word "desire" is probably linked with an Arabic term meaning "to urge, drive, impel" and she compares its usage in Genesis 3:16 with Genesis 4:7. This leads her to conclude that a better translation of Genesis 3:16 would be "and your desire shall be to control your husband but he should master you."

In other words, Foh is saying that one of the consequences of the Fall is that the woman has no desire to submit to her husband but desires to do the opposite. She wants to rule over him but she receives the call to submit to him. It is in light of this inherent tendency, this fallen urge, that the Bible speaks of submission as the main task of the wife.

Only that still leaves us with the question, "What does 'submission' mean?" Negatively, submission does not mean slavery or inferiority. It does not mean that a wife may never exert any influence, hold an opinion or make a comment. Positively it requires the wife to recognize certain things and adopt a certain attitude. What things? What attitude?

### **1. The Wife as Helper**

Genesis 2:18-22 stresses the fact that God made the woman to be a "helper fit for him", namely, for man. If you look in Webster's Dictionary you will discover that being a "helper" is often defined in a derogatory way. It describes someone with little or no skill who always does the bidding of someone else. A glorified gofer or maid, if you will. Biblically speaking, however, a "helper" does not point to inferiority. God Himself is often called the "Helper of Israel." A "helper" is someone who assists man, who supplies what he lacks and who makes him complete. Remember that a man without a woman is incomplete. In addi-

tion, the woman is called a "suitable helper" or a "helper fit for him" - tailor-made to his needs. This means that she is someone beautiful and perfectly made to complement man. Little wonder that Proverbs says, "He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favour from the Lord" (18:22). "An excellent wife, who can find? For her worth is far above jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain" (31:10,11).

## **2. The Wife as Submitter**

Still, the great value of a wife as helper does not negate the fact that the wife is called upon to submit to her husband. What this means is that she must recognize his leadership and do everything to promote it. She must not challenge it or undermine it. She must not allow him to ignore his responsibility and step into the vacuum herself so that he becomes a wimp. No, she must act in harmony with her calling, realizing that submission is something which is required of her. It is not conditional on her husband's treatment. Submission is something spiritual as well seeing that it is to be done "as to the Lord" (Eph. 5:22) and it can only be done in the power of the Spirit. Submission is also not something negative but positive in the sense that it calls on the wife to place her talents, ideas, opinions, desires, energies at his disposal in order that together good teamwork will result. Look at Proverbs 31 and you have the perfect picture of a woman who believed in submission but who at the same time proved herself to be an indispensable helper to her husband.

## **3. The Wife as Partner**

Although we have touched on the matter already, it should also be emphasized that the wife is also a partner, an equal partner in terms of her relationship to God. She may have a different role to play and different tasks to perform, but that does not make her any less than the man. Both husband and wife are made in the image of God. Both receive the call to be fruitful and multiply, to

fill the earth and subdue it, to exercise dominion (Gen. 1:28). Both are called "heirs of the grace of life" (1 Pet. 3:7). Therefore, they are equal partners in the service of God.

### *The Commitment of Husband and Wife*

Before we proceed to the last and final step we must add that the act and process of cleaving together involves more than two people with different roles and tasks. It also involves one in a life-long commitment. The Lord never meant this cleaving to be temporary or conditional. He intended it to be permanent. It is not to last as long as the money lasts, or the patience lasts, or the love lasts. Marriage is not a matter of convenience but of obedience.

To illustrate this, one can point to the fact that God considers marriage to be a covenant (Prov. 2:17; Mal. 2:14). This means that it is an irrevocable contract which binds two people together. A covenant rests on the faithfulness of the parties and is not dependent on the beauty and appeal of the wife or on the personality and money of the husband. It has no strings attached to it and no time limit either. It demands total and life-long commitment.

### **III. THE THIRD STEP OF MARRIAGE - WEAVING**

We come now to the final step of marriage and it has to do with weaving. Perhaps you think that I am going overboard in terms of my alliteration here (leaving-cleaving-weaving!). And you may have a point. On the other hand, this term is an accurate description of what should happen in every biblically sound marriage. Weaving is a process and so is marriage. It usually involves the use of different colours and threads or materials and so does marriage. It produces in time, if done right, a thing of extraordinary beauty and so can marriage.

Yet that begs the question, "How do two people weave themselves together? How do they become 'one flesh'?" Well, a number of factors come into play here.

### **A. Marriage Needs Time**

This final step of marriage is not something that takes place overnight nor is it the product of a few intense years of interaction. The creation of true unity and oneness is the product of a life-time. I say this because there is a tendency, especially for newlyweds, to assume that they have arrived at the goal already and then to rest on their laurels. Nevertheless, such an assumption is a mirage and a prelude to disappointment. Life in general has its stages and its phases. Marriage is no different. What begins as a twosome soon becomes a threesome or a foursome or more. A quiver is full before you know it but then it begins to empty out. Before one realizes it, the years have flown by and it is just the two of you again - hopefully, if death or discord do not disrupt the union. Marriage thus has a way of coming full circle.

Yet all along the way there are new challenges to meet, new problems to solve, new adjustments to make. It is not easy to adjust to living with someone else, to sharing and to compromising. It is not easy to deal with children, much less teenagers in the full throes of puberty. It is not easy to get used to the quiet and the slower pace after what seems like a life full of hustle and bustle. In the process one is always learning and discovering new things about one's spouse. Dealt with in the right way these things can add to the harmony and promote the unity.

### **B. Marriage Needs Glue**

But if marriage needs time, it also needs glue. What is the glue of marriage? It is love. What is love? Now that is a hard question to answer. Popular responses would be that love is

feeling, emotion, sharing, commitment, sex, giving and the list goes on and on. The best way to approach it may be a three-pronged one. In the Greek language there are three words for love: eros, phileo and agape, and each are distinctive.

Eros-love points in the sexual direction and from it we get English words like erotic and eroticism. It emphasizes that in a normal marriage relationship there will almost always be a sexual dimension. Indeed it is in the sexual union of husband and wife that love experiences its most intimate moments. Sex is both a powerful stimulant in love and a most reassuring sign of love.

In saying that we are not exaggerating. One needs only to listen to the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 where he enjoins married couples not to refuse each other except for a special reason and to come together again soon. How soon? Neither he nor the Scriptures generally give any guidelines when it comes to the frequency of the sexual act. What we do know, however, is that it is something that has been created by God to be enjoyed in the married state.

In addition to eros-love, there is also phileo-love and it describes love from another angle. Phileo points us in the direction of friendship, of having things and doing things in common. People who have phileo-love for each other are people who like to be together because they share common tastes, common ideas, common approaches, common hobbies, common likes and pastimes.

In my ministry I sometimes come across married couples who make life very difficult for each other because of this absence of phileo-love. She likes to shop; he hates it. She likes to stay at home; he wants to travel. She likes to read; he can hardly consume a page. She has hobbies; he has none. Suffice it to say that there is a compatibility problem here. Is there a solution for it? I suppose there always is, at least on paper. I suppose there should be, at least for Christians. Of course the solution lies not in a worldly direction for that is usually the way of trade her in and

try again. It lies in one's ability to adjust and to serve one's partner. It is often said that you can not teach an old dog new tricks and that goes for husbands too. However, that is a defeatist attitude. True Christian marriage should involve a willingness to change, to grow, to learn and to please one's spouse - at any age.

Finally, there is agape-love too. This is the most common word in the New Testament for love. It points to an attitude of heart in which caring, sacrifice, and commitment are present. Agape-love stretches beyond the limits of rationality, of patience, of deservedness.

On more than one occasion I have met men and women who are living proof of this kind of love. I remember the old man who cared for his wife for many years. She had suffered a debilitating stroke which left her partly paralyzed and this signaled the end of eros-love. After a time her mind began to fail and this meant the end of phileo love. In the end the only thing that was left was agape-love, a love that kept on giving and giving, even though it could no longer be returned. I remember too the woman who loved her husband even though he was a most unlovable specimen. In the face of indifference and abuse, even hatred, she kept on loving him. That too is agape-love. It is of the highest kind precisely because it is so undeserved, so committed, so sacrificial. It mirrors in some ways the love of Christ for His people.

Blessed indeed is the marriage that knows of love in all three varieties. It will keep the relationship going when the going gets tough.

### **C. Marriage Needs Lubrication**

Another need that a marriage striving for unity has is for lubrication. What I mean with that strange word is that marriage needs something that will keep it humming and operating smoothly. More than anything else this is the role that good

communication plays. What is good communication? What are its requirements?

The basic requirements of good communication are four in number: honesty or openness, self-control, a charitable and forgiving spirit, an ability to listen. Under the heading of honesty or openness is meant an ability to open up and reveal ourselves to each other. It entails the ability to make known one's problems, plans, pains, frustrations, feelings to one's spouse. Under the heading of self-control is meant the ability to channel one's speech in the right direction and not to vent one's spleen with hateful and cutting words. Under the heading of a charitable and forgiving spirit is meant the ability to harness one's emotions in an edifying manner and to direct them away from bitterness and indignation, wrath and slander. Under good listening is meant the ability to let someone else speak without interruption, giving them your undivided attention and trying to understand what they are really saying.

Needless to say, good communication is not something that happens automatically. Some people have a greater aptitude for it than others. Some learn it faster than others. Some practice it more consistently. Some personality types are better suited for it. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that all marriage partners need to strive for it and improve on it.

Most important of all,

#### **D. Marriage Needs Christ**

We have time to mention only one more need in our quest for unity, and we must mention it because it is more important than any other. It is this: marriage needs Christ. It needs Him in every conceivable way. In what way? Marriage needs Him to supply the strength to conform it to His will. All the commands and demands in the world will come away empty-handed if He doesn't give us the desire and the power to change hearts and minds and

attitudes. Marriage needs Him to supply forgiveness for all the sins and blunders that are committed by husband and wife on a daily basis. Marriage needs Him to supply love so that the marriage partners can go on loving each other. Marriage needs Him to supply the Holy Spirit who alone can defeat the works of the flesh and produce in our lives the fruits of the Spirit.

The message of Scripture is clear. "I can do all things in him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4: 13). In Christ we can have a Christian marriage. In Christ we can find joy and love and unity as husband and as wife. In Christ alone we can find the strength, the hope and the help to go on to the marriage feast of the Lamb of God. Need more be said?

## ***RESPONSE BY MRS. TONI KAMPEN***

### **Why submit?**

Rev. Visscher, you stated that the best answer to the question why a woman must submit to her husband comes from Susan Foh, who interprets Genesis 3:16 and Genesis 4:7 in such a way that a woman's punishment for the fall into sin is that her desire shall be to control her husband, but God calls her to submit. I have never heard this explanation before. Perhaps you could say more about this in the discussion.

I am sure you have all attended a wedding ceremony and watched the reaction of the audience when the pastor reads the marriage vows and asks the bride, "Do you promise to love and obey him, to assist him, and to live with him in holiness according to the gospel?" Usually this is followed by a snicker or a jab in the arm. Submission and obedience go hand in hand and are an ordinance of God with a purpose. The secular attitude with equal rights for equal persons has no place in a christian marriage. The Bible demands self-denying, sacrificial love, like Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her.

### **Equal but different marching orders**

As husband and wife we are equal although God has given us different marching orders. We both must be willing to deny ourselves and to put the interest of our spouse before our own. Marriage is not a 50/50 proposition or there would be all out war.

Occasionally a man exercises control in a marriage in the form of power, labeling it as "headship". This is anti-Scriptural. The christian approach to marriage means submission to one another. The wife empowers her husband by honouring and re-

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specting him, the husband empowers his wife by meeting her needs, respecting her limits and denying himself for her. This does not mean a wife is bound to do all her husband says without a peep or whimper. No man in his right mind wants his wife to be his subject. Christ does not treat the Church as His servant but rather as His partner-friend. John 15:15, Ephesians 5:25.

In today's society people expect marriage to be a contract for happiness but in reality marriage is a covenant. A beautiful triangle, God, husband and wife.

**Don't ever forget the "third Party"!**

Commitment can wear thin at times, to the point that you look at your spouse and think, "Why did I marry you?", but then we look up to God who is the "third party" in this covenant. He who joined us together, will put His arms around us and *keep* us together. Trust and obey!

I can honestly say that my deepest sense of fulfillment and my greatest joys have been in God's gift to me, to be a wife and mother.

## ***RESPONSE BY DR. H. A. SCHOLTENS***

### **What constitutes a marriage?**

The first problem that I have is in fact the question, "what constitutes a marriage?" And I ask that with a view to the unfortunate, common or at least not uncommon current practice of "shacking-up" or "common law marriages".

Now you may say, is this really a problem among Reformed people? I am afraid that if it isn't, it is going to be! Who would have thought twenty or twenty-five years ago that divorce and re-marriage would be such an issue as it presently is also in Reformed circles. And yet I suspect that today there is not a Reformed consistory that does not on a regular basis have to deal with this. We will sooner or later be confronted with the question, what constitutes a marriage? Does it need the sanction of the civil government in order to be constituted? Is the Church's blessing required from a biblical point of view? Or is the mere vow of fidelity between the two partners sufficient? I have a little difficulty calling such a relationship adulterous if both of the partners have not been in other relationships before. That is my first question: what constitutes a marriage from a biblical point of view?

### **Training in godliness**

My second concern has to do with what you mentioned under the heading of "training in godliness". When speaking about dating practices, you pronounced a prohibition on mixed courtships. I wonder if that should not be qualified. It seems to me that we are less than honest if we consider a date with a serious Christian Reformed or Free Reformed girl who accepts the Word of God and the Three Forms of Unity as we do, the same as a

date with a girl who has only a vague idea about Christianity generally and certainly has no commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ as her Saviour. When I look around it seems to me that we have been pretty successful in keeping our young people away from serious Christians from other Reformed churches; yet many seem to have no compunction at all about developing relationships with the ungodly. I suspect that there are parents in our midst who would give their eye-teeth for a serious Reformed boy or girl instead of the liaison that their son or daughter has currently with someone from the world. So, that is my second question: should the prohibition against mixed courtships not be qualified?

### **Be fruitful**

Another thing! Dr. Visscher, you mentioned "the fruitfulness of marriage" and in that context you spoke about the blessing of having children and that we should aim for an optimum number of children, not a maximum nor a minimum. How could one disagree? Yet, to achieve a maximum number of children requires some action on our part. And these are things we generally don't talk about and yet I can't help but think that it is especially in this area that we must be extremely careful to resist the temptation of the world.

Indeed, I wonder if sometimes we are not guilty of hypocrisy, of talking out of both sides of our mouth. We seem to at times have an official Canadian Reformed position, when we talk about children, as being gifts of the Lord; or being evidence that God's covenant carries on. Yet, off the record we talk differently, for instance: "O boy, look at that; she is pregnant *again!*" There is much irreverent, unchristian talk that I think parents expecting their sixth or seventh child may expect from the world, but talk that I know when it comes from a sister or a brother really hurts.

Unofficially also - well, we don't officially ever talk about it, according to me - unofficially practically *every* couple practices birth-control, sterilization in the form of tubelagations, vasectomies are commonly carried out on members of our various congregations and I don't want to say that I have any great problem with that but perhaps we should get them out of the closet and talk about it and see if there are indeed some biblical directives with regard to these practices.

**The spirit of the world?**

My sense is that in this very difficult area perhaps - and this is my own feeling - the greatest capitulation to the spirit of the world is the apparent, deliberate actions of some newly married couples to delay the blessing of children until it suits them. Now I know that I am saying a lot that probably hits close to the heart and I could say a lot more about it - and I don't want to say a whole lot more about it - and hopefully some of that will come out in the discussion. But then my question to you, Dr. Visscher, is: does Holy Scripture give us any directive with respect to birth control, both for newlyweds as well as for the rest of us in the childbearing age groups?

## ***REPLY OF REV. J. VISSCHER***

With regard to the questions of Dr. Scholtens:

### ***What constitutes a marriage?***

Is it the civil government that pronounces you husband and wife? Is it the Church that does that? I think in our present society it is a combination of both. But if you ask me what constitutes a *christian* marriage, I would say: a christian marriage is living together as husband and wife according to the will of Christ Jesus. In other words: husband and wife are constantly asking themselves, is this what the LORD wants and expects of us; is this the kind of behaviour, are these the kind of standards, the kind of expressions which He has revealed to us in His Word and are we faithful to Him in our relationship as husband and wife.

### ***Mixed courtship needs to be qualified!***

In my speech I made a reference to 2 Corinthians 6. Biblically speaking I think "mixed courtship" refers to a marriage of a believer and an unbeliever. I think that taking the term "mixed courtship" and just like that applying it, for example, to a serious believer from another Reformed Church is to misuse the term. I don't believe that in such a case one can speak biblically in terms of a "mixed courtship"; that is in any case not the way the Bible addresses it. In Scripture a "mixed marriage" is a marriage of a believer and unbeliever.

That is not to say that I necessarily recommend that kind of a practice. I think that we as parents impress upon our children, hopefully, the need to look for a marriage partner within the

Church of which we are a member. For there we stand on a common basis, a common approach to many of the issues of life. At the same time, however, I from time to time do feel the need to warn congregation members that not just any, let's say, Canadian Reformed boy or girl will do. There is *discrimination* even within the Church; there should be *discernment* within the Church. I would not want my daughters latching up with young men in the Church that I know, because that in itself would be a disaster. So, I do believe that there has to be discernment in the Church as well. Not every young man within the congregation is as committed as he should be and therefore the best thing is to teach your children what to look for in terms of a spouse and then you look "at home" before you look "abroad" and warn them of the dangers of "looking abroad". Now I can tell you that in our congregation we have a couple of young men who are going steady with young people from the Free Reformed Church. I have had experience with serious young people from the Christian Reformed Church as well. And because of a lot of common confessional ground many of these relationships are very fine relationships and I think as parents we should be down to earth enough to take that kind of thing into account.

I think every circumstance does requires its own approach but if you are talking about a relationship between a believer and an unbeliever: that's out! Period!

### ***Family-planning***

*Does Holy Scripture give us any directives?*

I think that Scripture gives us principles, general directives; I am not aware of the Scripture giving us any *specific* directives as to the number or as to the manner. I know we would dearly love those kind of specifics. That's why, I think, books on sexuality always are best-sellers because everybody wants to know what everybody else is doing or what everybody else thinks.

In that regard there are many misconceptions. I talk to the young people every year before the "marriage season" starts and we have a marriage seminar in which we get together for five, six nights to talk about these things. In those talks we are quite down to earth and open and it strikes me how many misconceptions there are. E.g. human sexuality stops at age sixty! (Did you know that? Prepare for it!) But that's a miss! We sometimes equate sexuality with being young! Forget it! It's a misnomer or whatever you want to call it.

The same thing about the number of children. I am very thankful that the Lord did not say that six was the magic number. Because my wife and I would have transgressed the limit and that might create some searching's of heart. And just imagine when you had received five children; then you would somehow be deficient. But the Lord in His great wisdom does not prescribe exact numbers. The Lord is basically saying that people are made differently; they cannot all be the same; marriages and couples are different and they cannot all share the same burdens. Also in this respect the Lord shows great sensitivity. As long as we at the same time recognize our responsibility as husband and wife. And I think there lies the great problem today, the problem of human self-centeredness, selfishness.

## **DISCUSSION AND QUESTIONS FROM THE FLOOR**

*1. May I come back to what has been said about "mixed courtship"? What should the reaction of parents be when their son or daughter marries someone from another church and they do that in spite of the warnings of the parents. Rev. Visscher, could you perhaps tell us a bit more about what their reaction should be?*

**Visscher:** A couple of comments come to mind:

First of all, I have not been in that situation as parent; so in a way it is easy for me to speak about it theoretically. If you as parent are directly faced with such a situation, it becomes a matter of greater sensitivity and emotions get involved. But I do think it all depends here on the situation. Where I come from - the Fraser Valley, in B.C. - there are some very faithful Free Reformed congregations for example. Theologically there is actually no difference between us; we had some symposiums and from time to time we meet together with colleagues from the Free Reformed and the Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches and we have hashed over many issues; theological issues, the church, regeneration, and the work of the Holy Spirit etc. But I think we have yet to discover a real, theological issue that divides us. The issue is sometimes more a matter of background and history and special emphasis on certain things.

I think that as a parent you have to recognize and look and say where is this boyfriend or girlfriend worshipping and how committed are they to the Lord and His service; and how com-

mitted is the Church of which they are a member. If you are convinced that the differences are not biblically based, that is one thing! Of course, if you are convinced that the differences are very serious and based on Scripture then you have a different problem on your hands and you have to deal with that. Although, I agree with you, it does become eventually in many cases a problem of, "Well it's o.k. that you go with her but keep in mind she has to come with us!" And not the other way around! If as a parent you give permission to your son/daughter to go steady with this young man/woman, you have to deal with that particular problem then and there and not delay it into the future.

For that is often what happens. First the relationship is more or less condoned and we let it go, hopefully it will turn out, while the issues involved are not broached. I think the issues should be broached rightaway, up front and not delayed. And honesty and directness as parents with your children is the best thing!

*2. I like to address my question to Mrs. Kampen. You spoke about submission of wives to their husbands, also of wives helping their husbands in their work and in reaching their potential. Could you perhaps also comment on relationships where there are no children, and husband and wife both work outside the home. Does this make for a somewhat different type of relationship between husband and wife?*

**Kampen:** I am sure it makes for quite a different relationship. Because when you have children your life tends to focus on your children and that's where all your arguments are about and where also your greatest joys lie. When your children move out your life becomes more like people who have no children. When there is just the two of you, we tend to think that such couples have not too many worries. I think however, that also

these couples probably have to work very hard on their marriage just the same as anyone else to keep it interesting. Also, since the woman is usually the nurturing one in the family I think that when there are no children that nurturing role of the wife is more directed to the husband and he is actually a lucky fellow!

But I do indeed think that the relationship would be quite different; more like when the children have moved out. Then couples with children are back to that position of life again.

Rev. Visscher, I would also still like to make a comment about that statement of Susan Foh. I think what she said is really true! Our natural bias is against submission for women. By nature we don't want to be submissive to God. And in fact to nobody! The angels were not submissive to God. Nobody wants to be submissive. In a christian marriage however you know that God requires this of you, so that is what you strive for and work on. Out of love for the Lord and your husband.

3. *Rev. Visscher, could you comment on the isolation felt by childless couples when talk at for instance the Women's Society is often about children; when also social visits are largely between couples with children.*

**Visscher:** One of the comments that I would like to make is more an observation. Often childless couples tend to withdraw from interaction with couples with children. I am not sure exactly where the fault lies with the one or the other, or even whether there is a fault to be assessed. And if there is, does the fault then lie with the childless couple that is perhaps very self-conscious of their situation because they have not yet reconciled themselves with it one way or another so that these kind of visits cause a lot of pain. Or does it lie in the fact that when they do visit couples with children, all that the women - or perhaps also the men - can talk about is the children and what John did last

week or did not do and so forth and so on. Probably it comes from both sides. I think there is an insecurity on the side of childless couples that *they* have to address and couples with children who have childless couples visiting them have to be sensitive to their situation and take that into account also in terms of fellowship that they have with one another.

4. *Dr. Scholtens, what according to you are the limits of the calling to have children in terms of the health of the mother?*

**Scholtens:** I think that this is a very good question and in a sense it is a loaded question, a pregnant question, if you allow me. For you can talk for hours about it or write whole books on it. And indeed Dr. Visscher as well mentioned that those who strive for a maximum number of children may do so at the expense of the health of the wife.

Now I would divide the limits into two parts, physical and emotional or mental. We the panelists had the benefit of receiving Dr. Visscher's speech about a week ago. So I knew that he was going to say that and I gave it some thought. I wondered if one looked about this audience whether one could pick out the mothers who had eight children by virtue of their being particularly unhealthy. If you seriously think about the number of children in terms of physical limits then I would not ordinarily think that multiplicity of pregnancies are particularly harmful under most circumstances.

I can think of all kinds of things that would indeed limit it. For instance if a woman has only cesarean sections. Certainly people after the fourth or fifth or sixth get a little antsy although that may not always be justified. I can also think of all kinds of physical disabilities that a mother may have that have nothing to do with any pregnancies but may make any pregnancy difficult. There are people in our congregations for example who have se-

rious congenital problems with their heart or with their kidneys in which case a pregnancy can be disastrous. They are courting disaster not only in terms of their own health but also their own life and therefore also the life of their unborn child. So, those are some physical limits. But I wish to add that these physical problems by and large are exceptions, rather than common conditions.

I should also say that if a woman were not to breast-feed she could conceivably, physiologically have a child every year. So, if she would get married at age 21, it would not be difficult for her from a strictly physiological point of view to have fourteen or fifteen children. Although the influence of breastfeeding on the number of children is not predictable, it can be said that when you look at large numbers of women that breastfeed exclusively and compare them with large numbers of women that do not breastfeed, the spacing between the birth of children seems to be more like eighteen months (if you needed a reason to breastfeed).

I suspect though, that for most of our families the reason for this question, "What are the limits of the call to have children in terms of the health of the mother?", I suspect, that it is more mental and emotional than physical. To some extent I speak for my wife and I, and I know I speak for many of you when I say that when you are up to your eyeballs in little kids under the age of five, you think that you go nuts! - Your laughter I take as concurrence! - But the problem is that to some extent this situation is brought on by a perceived prohibition against birth-control for the purpose of spacing, righteous or godly spacing. I think a wife is meant to be much more than a "baby-machine"; she has to be a mother - if God gives children; she also has to be a wife. The problem with this perceived prohibition against birth-control means that these people have four or five kids in a row, things are going to crack up and they have their tubes tied. You may think that I am talking about something that doesn't happen very often! Well, it happens remarkably frequently in our circles!

But the problem is that those people will also miss the joy of having children a little better spaced and they will also miss the joy - I speak from personal experience - of having a "nako-mertje". And if you don't know what that means that's "a Johnny come lately"! Or "a Susy come lately!" I can assure you, and I know again having spoken to those of us who have had that blessing, that there is nothing more joyful in a family with teenagers than a new-born. Families with teen-agers are not necessarily the most peaceful communities! There can be all kinds of difficulties, hassle after hassle. There is hardly a meal that is hassle-free and all of a sudden in that family you introduce one thing that is loved by all! That is this new child!

Furthermore, - you got me off on a great topic! - I think one of the dangers in our society is that many couples will have a child and that is then the first infant that they will ever in their life have to deal with. For they come from a family where there were two children born about a year apart and there were no more children after that. Consequently they never saw their own mother deal sensitively, motherly with a new-born. I think that the large families where the children are spaced have the advantage that the older children of age twelve, fourteen, sixteen will also see mother deal intimately with a new born. Talking about learning by example! They will learn so that when they get their own child it will not be all new to them.

So, if I may make a plea: when you are up to your eye-balls in kids, don't opt for a permanent method of birth-control; use your head, and opt for another responsible one.

*5. Dr. Scholtens, do we have a responsibility as to family-planning or can we say that the LORD's blessings, children, are given to us and not taken and therefore we should trust in the LORD's care and wisdom, giving us the optimum for our situation. After all, we cannot foresee the future or how these bless-*

*ings will be a blessing. Therefore is it not the best to leave the giving of blessings up to the LORD when He wills as often as He wills?*

**Scholtens:** Well, I have some difficulty with that! Because it would seem to me that we have more responsibility than just having children. As I said earlier, a woman could easily end up having fourteen or fifteen children, and I know that there have been many happy families with that number of children. But I would not dare to say that it is necessarily correct for every one. Also the comments which Dr. Visscher made with respect to other circumstances influencing that decision must not be lost sight of. I wonder if he would not also like to comment on this question as well.

**Visscher:** I would think the way this question is phrased, it sounds very - and I don't want to use that term in a negative way - it sounds rather pious to state it this way. But I do wonder whether it in fact is not a dereliction of our responsibilities. I realize that God is sovereign - we believe and confess that - but at the same time we are also called upon as husband and wife and as parents to be responsible and therefore to simply say we leave it in the hands of the LORD, knowing full well that a certain activity may well create a certain result regardless, is to me almost a form of irresponsibility. I concur basically with what Dr. Scholtens has been saying and I think that his remarks are very much in place and should be taken to heart.

## QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. How much thought and prayer goes into the making of our life shaping decisions, such as choosing a marriage partner? Do, or should parents pray and talk with their children about this?

2. How do we evaluate "mixed courtships" in the light of 2 Corinthians 6:14 ff.? How do we interpret the term "unbeliever" in the context of courtships with members of other churches?

3. Can emotional well-being, or the inter-family relationships be a valid reason for limiting the number of children? What (other) considerations may be appropriate?

4. Is there such a thing as *Christian* family planning?

5. Review and discuss the concepts of headship and submissiveness as found in Scripture (for instance Ephesians 5:23; 1 Peter 3:11).

How should these commands be applied in today's setting? Is there room for role reversal when the other spouse has obviously stronger talents?

6. Communication in marriage has, at least, four aspects (honesty, selfcontrol, willingness to forgive, and ability to listen).

How can each of these aspects strengthen marriage? Consider ways to improve your marriage through these, by defining and focusing on those two aspects of communication which require the most improvement.

7. Do you make room for Christ in your marriage? How can we do so more consciously?
  
8. What is the role of civil government in marriage? How does society's acceptance and legalization of common-law relationships undermine Biblical norms in marriage?