

Christian Marriage (Part One)

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In the March 28, 2013 issue of *Psychology Today*, Dr. Aaron Ben-Zéév authored an article titled: "Does Cohabitation Lead to More Divorces?" He wrote:

Premarital cohabitation has increased significantly, and more than seventy percent of US couples now cohabit before marriage. The major reason supporting premarital cohabitation is that it enables the couple to get know each better and to see whether they get along well enough to embark on marriage. However, counter-intuitively, many studies have found that premarital cohabitation is associated with increased risk of divorce, a lower quality of marriage, poorer marital communication, and higher levels of domestic violence.

Despite the negative consequences most people still try to approach pre-marriage "as seems right in their own eyes." A major driving force behind this cavalier approach to marriage is lust. A couple's obsessive desire for one another overwhelms upright morality, decency, and patience.

According to Christ, sexual lust is the spiritual equivalent of adultery, just as hateful anger is the spiritual equivalent of murder. The standard of His followers is to be, quite simply, chastity before marriage and fidelity afterward. In this Jesus reinforces the overall principle of the biblical teaching on marriage.

Matthew 5:27-28 "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

It is evident, of course, that this standard is opposed to the widely accepted standards of our day. Never in the history of the Western world since the death of Greek and Roman paganism has fidelity in marriage been so threatened either from within or without, or an unbridled indulgence of free sexual passions been so encouraged or so praised.

In the first place, it is threatened by the mass media which use the lure of sex to push materialism and to glamorize the pursuit of mere pleasure. This is acute simply because the media have a scope and immediacy in this age that they have possessed in no other age.

For decades, television has filled our living rooms with sex-filled advertisements. And the newspapers not only carry reports of sexual crimes that would have been omitted years ago, but also sell movies through advertisements that are both more explicit and more perverted than television.

One writer has noted that sex is "the cornerstone of mass persuasion and the symbol par excellence of the life of leisure and consumption." Sadly, this view of sex is not sex as God intended it within the bounds of marriage.

Faithful and monogamous marriage is on such a rapid downward spiral today that the momentum is near impossible to reverse. With decades of the sexually immoral lifestyle philosophy behind us, which continues in various perverse shapes and forms in the present sex-crazed culture, we find sexual perversions openly displayed even in the city streets.

Hedonism is the philosophy that makes pleasure the primary goal in life, and it is as evident in the pursuit of the second home, the third car, and advantageous friends, as it is in adultery and premarital sex experimentation. In fact, in the sexually immoral lifestyle the two go hand-in-hand. Proverb 28: says:

Proverbs 28:6 Better is the poor who walks in his integrity than one perverse in his ways, though he be rich.

The pervert believes that choosing the right wine or the right cell phone is almost as important as finding the right spouse. The “pleasure-first” philosophy rampant in our time has contributed to the degenerating of the marriage relationship.

Another major source of the present-day threat to marriage and to the accompanying Christian moral virtues is the “new moral code.” This is the morality of self-fulfillment. This debased philosophy is centered on the self and is based on the idea that moral truth is relative to your own circumstances at the moment.

In other words, this approach to morality is based for the most part on two fundamental convictions. First, that the proper action in any given set of circumstances is determined by the situation itself and not by any predetermined norm of ethics, even biblical, and second, that the only absolute demand in the Christian scheme of things is love as defined by each individual.

Here is we see the perversion of Protestantism and how deceitful it is. Anything is right that does not seem to hurt the other person, and whether it hurts him or not is a conclusion to be reached in the context of the situation. Relativity is the overall theme.

Adultery is wrong and even the impure thoughts that precede it are wrong. There are several reasons why the new moral code is inadequate as a philosophy to live by. For one thing, it is impossible to define a situation, limited as we are by time and partial knowledge.

A couple in the back seat of a car may decide that intercourse outside of marriage will not hurt them and that no one else need know. But it does hurt them and it has future unforeseen negative consequences. Many such persons are thereafter haunted by guilt, and thousands of children are without families today simply because some couple could not foresee the true consequences as they gave vent to their lust.

Furthermore, the new moral code presupposes an ability to make a proper decision that sinful men simply do not have. Who is to determine whether adultery or sex before marriage can be beneficial to the parties concerned? Or free of consequences? Certainly not the couple! They are the last ones capable of making the right decision. The truth is that no one is capable of such decisions in such situations, as we see in Jeremiah 17.

Jeremiah 17:9-10 “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings.”

So premarital sex and adultery will be judged by God and the judgment is death, unless repented of. In spite of these criticisms, however, the new moral code contributes to the ethical climate of our day and to a far larger degree reflects it. And the cry, “If it feels good, do it,” has become the motto of the last fifty years and is well entrenched in our society.

But at the same time we must acknowledge honestly that the Christian standard is so difficult and so contrary to our instincts that obviously something is wrong both with us personally and with the world’s society. That is why God’s Holy Spirit has to replace our human spirit and rid us of our sinful thoughts. We must acknowledge that we still sin, even after conversion, and we are not automatically free from, victorious over, or even innocent of, the world’s perversion of sex because of it.

What is actually happening when a man commits sexual immorality? He gives his body to a prostitute. The Scripture says that sexual union makes two people into one united body. In other words, a body which rightly belongs to Christ has been prostituted to someone else. Sexual immorality is not a gray area—it is sin! Remember the requirement of the spirit of the law in Matthew 5.

Matthew 5:27-28 “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

So for men in the church, it is still something that has to be overcome, and for many on a regular basis.

In the apostle Paul’s first epistle to the Corinthians, he says that of all sins, sexual immorality is one that affects a man’s (or woman’s) body and insults and pollutes it.

Paul wants to keep the Corinthian brethren from sinning in body and in spirit and so he pleads that other sins are external to a man, that is, against others, but in this he sins against his own body, which is destined for union with Christ.

I Corinthians 6:18-20 Flee sexual immorality. [That is a *command* there.] Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit [Jesus] who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.

Paul makes an appeal, and because God’s Spirit dwells in us we have become a temple of God and our very bodies are sacred. Christ died to save not just *part* of a person, but the *whole* person—body and spirit.

Now what are we to do to live as we should? We cannot escape the world's pressure and Satan's influence to just do it. We must resist them. We cannot retreat into celibacy because God created sex and gave marriage. We certainly cannot give in to promiscuity. The only answer is that we must fight a debased and perverted morality with a pure one and we must live and teach what Christ taught as the true way to happiness. You cannot just get rid of it, you have to replace it with something good.

This must start with a clear recognition that the sexual instinct as we see it and know it has gone wrong. Notice I did not say that sex or the sex instinct is wrong. Christianity is almost the only great world religion that approves of the body and has thoroughly encouraged sex in marriage.

Now if you are following the world's new moral code you will lose your opportunity for eternal life if you do not repent! Everyone of us are influenced by the world and live, at least partly, as the world does.

For one thing, the appetite for sex, stimulated by our culture, is enormously out of proportion to its function. We have more divorce, more perversions of sex (LGBTQ), more illegitimacy, and more downright misery in marriage and outside it than ever before.

As of February 2014, ABC News had counted at least 58 different gender classifications; most are related in some way or other to sexuality. As confusion increases astronomically in this society, many are suffering from STDs, mental breakdowns, and even insanity. People are flocking to marriage counselors, psychiatrists and sadly, in rare cases, to ministers for help to unscramble the ruin they have made of their lives.

Another thing we must recognize is that if we are to live as God's children in this world, there are times when we will simply have to run away from the temptation. This is not the whole answer, as you will see, because the answer to any evil is never entirely a denial but always a more powerful good. But this is a partial answer and, at times, the only one. Listen to Paul's advice to the Corinthians again here in I Corinthians 6.

I Corinthians 6:18 Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body.

Now notice what Paul cautioned Timothy, the young preacher, about and encouraged him to do instead here in II Timothy 2.

II Timothy 2:22 Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. [with members of the church]

So what we fill that youthful lust with is the association with fellow Christians, people of like mind. We have to replace those people in the world who are tempting us with God's people. That is where we should run to for help in these types of situations. That is who our social contact should be with.

The command to flee what is wrong is combined with the command to pursue what is right.

I Timothy 6:11-12 But you, O man of God [member of the church], flee these things [verse 9 mentions "foolish and harmful lusts"] and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life [if not

laying hold of eternal life, it indicates that you are not fleeing these lusts], to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

The pursuit of right is not to be done alone but along with other believers. You are to do right on your own, but there are also times where it is to be done in connection with other members of the church. Connection with other members of the church is essential for both progress in sanctification and perseverance in the faith. This is part of the reason why we are not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together as brethren.

Often reason is pushed aside when it is essentially needed. Joseph reasoned well when he fled from Potiphar's wife, but David did not when he invited Bathsheba over to the palace. A moment's reflection will show why in some instances this is the case. In most of the temptations of this life, although they may be severe, the Christian has an ally in reason if he uses it. Not in human reasoning but in wise godly reasoning.

He may be tempted to cheat on his income tax; but if he is, his reason will tell him that the computers today are very thorough and that the gain, if there is one, is entirely out of proportion to the loss of money, time, and reputation if he should be caught. Godly reasoning takes it to a spiritual level: cheating is lying and/or stealing!

So there we see a physical aspect of the law and the spiritual aspect of the law. We are to take the idea of committing adultery, especially as men, to a higher and more spiritual level of not even lustng and staying away from such situations.

Reason unites with and man's (or woman's) knowledge of the good and the internal power of the Holy Spirit to save him. It is the same in many other temptations, but not with love. It is entirely different with love or with the sexual instinct. There is something here that operates apart from reason, or even against it.

What couple ever sat alone in an apartment reasoning out the relative advantages and disadvantages of premarital sex, and then had sex on that basis, or on that basis avoided it? How many have made a decision like that just out of sheer reason? It does not work that way. The emotional and physical drive is so strong that reason gets clouded.

Consequently, if you are in this situation or if you find yourself in this situation, you must flee like Joseph. Go see church people, your family, or ministers for godly reinforcement, because, generally speaking, neither you nor anybody else is able, at all times, to avoid these sexual temptations.

In the final analysis, however, even running is not the solution. Although it will help for the moment, it will not do so permanently. Total victory requires a more powerful and more vigorous belief system. That belief system is tied up, as it must be, with the nature and the purposes of God.

It is not sex alone, although sex is part of it. Abstinence is not the only thing necessary for the unmarried; although it is a start and a must-do. A true understanding and appreciation of marriage, Christian marriage, marriage on the highest possible plane is what is necessary. It is marriage as God intended marriage to be, marriage as an illustration of the union of the Christian with Christ.

Sadly, much of what passes for Christian marriage is not Christian, and we know that even Christian marriages are often joyless, dull affairs. But the proper antidote is not self-satisfaction or denial, but rather a high and ennobling grasp of what marriage should be and can be when a man and a woman are united by God and enjoy the privileges of sex within that relationship.

If you do not understand the value and divine institution that marriage is, you are going to have serious problems in your marriage. A lack of that understanding is devastating. You have to understand what the goal is (which we will get to in a little later), in order to have a godly and fulfilling marriage.

It is necessary at this point, to say one thing to each of two different groups of people. The first group comprises those who are not married. Sometimes when one speaks about marriage, those who are not married get the feeling that they are incomplete if they remain single. But this is not true.

As we will see, the sexual relationship is only part of being married, and the fullness of marriage involves being male and female on a much broader scale, much of which is natural and possible even apart from a sexual relationship.

Besides, even as wonderful as it can be, marriage is still only an earthly picture of the greater relationship of Jesus Christ to the church, and for the unmarried individual there is always the possibility of wholeness and fulfillment of the whole personality with Christ. We all need to remember that.

To the second group, those who are going to be saying as we go on talking about marriage, “Yes, that’s all correct. That is what marriage should be. One should remain pure before marriage and faithful afterward, but I haven’t done that, and it’s too late for me now.”

The answer to this type of person is, no, it is not too late. The glory of the way in which God deals with sinful men and women, which we all are, is that God is able to pick us up where we are and as we are, and set us in His way, which is always a way of blessing.

When we see a secret sin, we ask for forgiveness, God forgives, and we can move on having learned the lesson, hopefully, but we still have to continue to resist and not make the same mistakes. All that is true, and yet the best way is to avoid the sins entirely as God gives us help. He will if we submit to Him and do not hinder Him from blessing us in our sexual relationships in marriage.

As I have emphasized, a firm grasp of what marriage should and can be under God is the only reliable antidote to the pleasure-seeking new moral code of our age. This truth is essentially important, so let us develop it further.

What is it that makes a marriage Christian? What are God’s purposes in marriage? These questions may be answered correctly only by saying that God is the Author of marriage and that He established it as the most important illustration in all of life of how God joins true believers to Jesus Christ in faith and how He does so forever.

The basis of everything that is to be said about Christian marriage lies in the fact that God has established marriage and that it is therefore a divine institution. In performing a wedding, it is important to begin the marriage service by calling attention to the truth that God has instituted marriage.

God has established marriage, that is the point, and it follows from this that marriage must be governed and directed by His rules, especially if it is to result in the happiness and joy that all human beings acknowledge should belong to it.

Who is it that originally made the race male and female? Genesis 1:27 has the answer. The answer of course is God! Who is it that commanded, "Be fruitful and increase in number?" Genesis 1:28 says again, God! Who is it who said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him?" Genesis 2:18 says again it is God!

It was God who brought the first bride to the first husband and thus established the first human family as recorded in Genesis 2:22. In the New Testament in Matthew 19, Jesus himself reinforced the teaching that marriage is a divine institution.

Matthew 19:4-10 And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate." They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?" He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery." His disciples said to Him, "If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry."

For those of you who are not married, it is better for you to remain unmarried than to marry the wrong man and divorce later. It is for this reason that the church speaks of "holy matrimony." Because we believe that God established it, that His laws should regulate it, and that it is far greater than a merely civil or social arrangement.

A very practical consequence follows upon this. Because if it is true that God has established the state of marriage, then we must never make fun of it or of anything connected with the marriage relationship. To speak disdainfully or sarcastically of married life is to criticize its Creator, which is to blaspheme God. Consequently, neither you nor I should ever joke about our marriages or the marriage relationship in a disparaging way.

In addition, the fact that God has established marriage means that you and I are to get our ideas about it, not from the books we may read or from the movies, but from God Himself and from the Bible. The general impression you get from secular books, and even sometimes the Christian ones, is that marriage is primarily a matter of sexual compatibility and adjustment.

This *is* an aspect of marriage; but at best it is one-sided. By itself it is only slightly less misleading than the marriages in movies, where marriage is either a farce or else the institutionalization of

romantic love. Neither of these is right, and what the Bible teaches about marriage is quite different. For instance, as far back as the early pages of Genesis we read,

Genesis 2:24 Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

What does this mean? We must not make the mistake of thinking that this refers only to a sexual union, because the Bible uses the word “flesh” in a far broader sense than the meanings we give to it. The word means the person as a whole human being—mind *and* body.

Thus the union, in a certain sense, makes one person of those who were two persons before. It is a single organism in which the relationship of a wife to a husband or husband to wife is like that of the hand to the head of a person, or the heart to the mind.

It must be a union of body with body, first of all, which is to say that there must be a valid sexual relationship. This is important. For this reason, the Christian church has acknowledged that a marriage has not actually taken place until the sexual union is consummated. If sexual union does not take place or cannot take place, then the marriage can be annulled as invalid. This is a vital aspect of the marriage relationship.

According to the Bible, neither the man nor the woman is to defraud the other of the sexual experience.

I Corinthians 7:4-5 The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. [This shows the union of being one body.] Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

Paul is talking to brethren in the church here. And granted the Corinthians were in a society that was so sex-crazed that they even had to turn their daughters over to the temple for prostitution for a time before they were married. What a debauched society! Are we living in a society any better? So this advice applies just as much to us today as it did for them.

The quickest way for the marriage to end up in trouble is for the wife to have a ‘headache’ every night and go to sleep early to avoid the sex act, or for the husband to lose interest in his wife romantically and to spend his nights elsewhere or with the guys. Sex must be a regular expression of the relationship.

On the other hand, if the relationship is based upon nothing but sex, in other words, if it is a marriage of body with body alone and not also of soul with soul, then the marriage is weak and inadequate and it is headed for the divorce courts.

When the attraction wears off, as it almost always does if there is nothing more to sustain it, the relationship is finished; and there is either total indifference, a divorce, or adultery. This is the result of a marriage that is based purely on physical attraction.

A better marriage than this is a marriage that is also a union of soul with soul, in addition to being a union of body with body. The word “soul” is a word that refers to the intellectual and emotional side of a person’s nature, involving all of the characteristics that we associate with the functioning of the mind.

In Leviticus 17, we learn that the life resides in the blood. A body is greater than a biochemical reaction. The life force comes from the spirit in man and that is what makes a man different than an animal.

Elihu observed that there is a spirit in man, giving him the ability to think and understand, giving him a point of contact with God, separating him from the animals. Paul differentiates the spirit in man from God's Holy Spirit, dividing a human being into spirit (the mind and soul) and our life and body (flesh).

Therefore, a marriage that involves a union of souls is a marriage in which a couple shares an interest in the same things, they seek to establish a meeting of the minds as it were, both intellectually and emotionally. Such marriages will always last longer than a marriage that is just body with body.

At this point a special word is appropriate to Christians who are married. Because, whenever a minister speaks like this to Christians, many are already racing ahead of him and are wrongly concluding that because their marriages are ones of spirit with spirit, therefore they do not need to worry very much about a union of their minds or souls. This is not right.

Not only do we need to worry about it at times, we also need to work toward it. Because an emotional and intellectual union does not in itself come naturally. It has to be worked at, just like anything else in life. *It takes a lot of work.*

What does a girl have in her mind when she marries a young man? What is her vision of this new husband? Well, it has something to do with her father and whether she liked him or rebelled against him. If she constantly rebelled against him when she was a teenager, she will do the same with a husband later. There will be no submission on her part.

Now, what happens when a girl with a vision of some handsome movie star and a man with a vision of some gorgeous movie star get married and begin to find out that the other person is not much like their vision?

Either they center their minds on the difference between the superficial ideal and what they are increasingly finding the other person to be like and then try, either openly or subversively to push the other spouse into that image. Or, by the grace of God, they increasingly come to accept the other person as he or she is, including his or her standards of how they themselves should be, and then under God seek to conform to the best and most uplifting of those standards.

It must be one or the other of those ways. The personality of a marriage can be a commitment where two people can come together quietly from the struggles of the world and feel safe, accepted, and loved. Or it can be a battleground where two egos are locked in a lifelong struggle for supremacy, a battle which is for the most part invisible to the rest of the world.

If you and I are to have the former in our marriages, then we must work toward it. And we must do it by cultivating the interests and the aspirations of the other party, our spouse.

A true marriage, then, must be a marriage of body with body and of soul with soul. But it must also be a marriage of spirit with spirit. It is for this reason that the only marriages that can approximate the kind of marriage that God intended to exist in this world are Christian marriages. Marriages in the world are without spirit with spirit.

Marriages within the church are in a much higher category and much more is expected of us than the rest of the world, but all marriage is a divine institution. Worldly marriages are unable to have that third factor of spirit with spirit.

If you are a Christian, you must marry another Christian, or else you must not marry at all. If you do marry a non-Christian, then you are willfully choosing substantial unhappiness, because you will be unable to share that which is most real and most precious to you.

What will happen to you can be illustrated from the case of Solomon. Solomon had been the recipient of many blessings from God, first because of God's promises to his father David and then because of the fact that Solomon had himself determined to walk in God's way of life, by asking for wisdom.

However, after the Temple was finished and Solomon was at ease in Jerusalem, he began to get ideas, one of which was to marry the daughter of the Pharaoh of Egypt. This was not God's will for him, because the princess of Egypt did not worship the Eternal.

Nevertheless, he married her even though he knew it was wrong for him to do so. It was one step in his downfall. Someone will say, "How do you know it was wrong?" The answer is that one verse in the story tells us so and indicates that even Solomon knew it. We will read that II Chronicles 8.

II Chronicles 8:11 Now Solomon brought the daughter of Pharaoh up from the City of David to the house he had built for her, for he said, "My wife shall not dwell in the house of David king of Israel, because the places to which the ark of the Lord has come are holy."

He knew that there was a difference her and the holiness that was expected of Israel. In other words, Solomon was saying, "I recognize that this woman doesn't fit in with the things that I know to be true about God; and whenever I bring her around the palace of David or the Temple I feel guilty and my conscience bothers me. The only solution is to build her another house and thereafter to live my life in as nearly separate but equal compartments as is possible."

That is the description of a marriage to someone in the world if you are a Christian. Your life becomes compartmentalized and cannot share the most important things in life with. Do not think that you will lift the non-Christian up, and that he or she will become a Christian. That may happen eventually because of God's great grace, but even if it does there will still be years of heartache and sorrow.

If the other person is not a Christian or does not become one sometime before the engagement, on the authority of God's Word, he or she is not the husband or the wife for you.

II Corinthians 6:14 Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?

You will have a marriage of body with body and sometimes even of soul with soul, but you will never have a marriage of spirit with spirit, and that is what God wants your marriage to be.

The final and conclusive proof of all, is the truth that when God created us male and female and established the state of marriage, He did so for a definite purpose. What was the purpose? It was to provide the best illustration in life of how God joins a man or woman to Jesus Christ and how He joins them to Him forever.

Someone says, “Didn’t God create marriage so there would be children? Isn’t marriage for reproduction purposes?” No, not primarily. Yes, this is one sideline of marriage, but it is secondary one. If it were not, a marriage without children would be incomplete, a failure. That is not true. “Well, then, why did He establish it?” He established it as an illustration of the relationship between Christ and the church.

Ephesians 5:22-33 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This is a great mystery [meaning that no one in the world can understand it], but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

So, a wife is to submit to her husband as to the Lord. Paul says that a husband is to love his wife just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. He concludes by saying of marriage, “This is a profound mystery, but I am talking about Christ and the church. Husbands love your wife and wives respect your husband!”

In other words, God established marriage so that a Christian husband and a Christian wife could act out in their own relationship the relationship that Christ has to you and me and thereby point us to Him as the supreme love, bridegroom, husband, protector, and provider of His church.

To marry as God intends men and women to marry is to illustrate this most sublime of relationships: the relationship of Jesus Christ to those who believe in Him, and the relationship of the church to Jesus, to the One who loved us and who gave Himself for us. If you see this truth, then you are well on the way to a blessed and happy marriage, because it is the foundation. Because you will have the spiritual motivation and overall orientation to make a happy marriage possible.

People today go into marriage with the attitude of “If this doesn’t work, we can just get divorced.” And even some do not see the need to get married, which is not the right thoughts either. Marriage is not something to take lightly, it is a very serious matter. God does not take it lightly and neither should we!

One of the most important things that can be said about a Christian marriage is that within the relationship God has established an organic union between two persons. An organic union, not an organization. With that said, it also must be said that marriage does have organizational aspects. There must be order in marriage.

How is a marriage to function? Is it to be a democracy? Is it to be a dictatorial system? A monarchy? Or is it a republican form of government? What are the duties of the husband, wife, and children to each other and to Jesus Christ?

Many of the answers to these questions are found here in Ephesians 5:22-33. In this chapter marriage is set forth as an illustration of the relationship of Jesus Christ to the church, and the duties of the husband and wife to each other are set forth in terms of that relationship.

The wife is to submit herself to her husband as to the Lord. The husband is to love his wife just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her. Paul continues on here in Ephesians 6.

Ephesians 6:1-3 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother,” which is the first commandment with promise [the promise is:]: “that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.” [This is not only length of time, but quality of life as well.]

So the wife is to obey her husband “in the Lord” and children are to obey their parents “in the Lord” as well.

As parents there are at least three ways in which we can do injustice to our children: First, we can forget that things do change and that the customs of one generation are not the customs of another.

Second, we can exercise such control that it is an insult to our upbringing of our children. To keep a child too long in leading-strings is simply to say that we do not trust him, which is simply to say that we have no confidence in the way in which we have trained him. It is better to make the mistake of too much trust than of too much control. Nevertheless, there must be a balance, defined by Scripture.

And third, we can forget the duty of encouragement, by only correcting him at every turn. The parents on their part are to raise their children “in the training and admonition of the Lord.” Because the parent, by his age and experience, is presumed to be qualified to direct and guide a child, the love which God has implanted in the heart of a parent for a child secures, in general, that the parent is inclined to carry out his responsibility in such a way as not to injure the child.

A father will not, unless too angry or intoxicated, abuse his authority. He loves the child too much. He desires his welfare, and God’s placing of the child under the authority of the parent is about the same thing in regard to the child’s welfare, as it would be to endow the child with all the wisdom and experience of the parent himself all at once.

Parents have a lot of hard knocks experience and whenever a parent gives the child advice, it is advice based on all that experience. So for a child to ignore and dishonor a parent by rebelling against them or disobeying them is a very sad child. God has commanded that children respect their parents and for very good reason.

Proverbs 23:22-26 Listen to your father who begot you, and do not despise your mother when she is old. Buy the truth, and do not sell it [Acquire it and do not let go of it.], also wisdom and instruction and understanding. The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice, and he who begets a wise child will delight in him. Let your father and your mother be glad, and let her who bore you rejoice. My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways.

Observe the parents' ways and all the experience they have gathered over the years. A parent in God's church should be reflecting God's ways through their parenting.

We now want to look at the rules governing the husband and wife relationship. The first word God has is to the wives. It is an unpopular word, especially today, because God says that the wife is to *submit* herself to her husband.

The teachings found in Ephesians 5 are found throughout the Bible, but Ephesians contains the most extensive passage. As a reminder:

Ephesians 5:22-24 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.

But it is also true that the same thing is said as far back as Genesis 3.

Genesis 3:16 To the woman [God speaking] He said: I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; In pain you shall bring forth children; your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."

Colossians 3:18 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

I Peter 3:1-2 Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some [the unconverted] do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives, when they observe your chaste conduct accompanied by fear.

Again, the reference is to the standards set for all of us by Christ. The biggest difficulty with these verses today is that most wives do not realize what they actually mean, and most husbands do not fully understand them either.

What does it mean that the wife is to submit herself to her husband as to the Lord? Well, it certainly does not mean that she is submitting to a form of slavery or tyranny, because we are not called to a form of slavery or tyranny by Christ.

It does not mean a type of blind obedience either, because a wife is not merely physical property. Neither does it mean that the submission itself is always entirely one-sided, because in verse 21 in the ESV says that we are to:

Ephesians 5:21 (ESV) submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. [who is our bridegroom]

Actually, the verse means that the wife was created primarily as a suitable partner for the man, and thus, in a very real way she is to subordinate her interests to his, although equal in spiritual potential.

One of the underlying meanings of the Greek and Latin words translated “be subject” bears this out, because they are constructed of a verb meaning: “to set; determine; or place, and a preposition meaning “under.” So the literal meaning is “throw oneself under.” Thus, the words refer to a type of obedience that is supporting like a queen backing up a king.

The wife is to be this to her husband. If any wife is thinking to herself that this is a demeaning position, she is to remember that, in I Corinthians 11 it says:

I Corinthians 11:3 But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.

No woman should be ashamed to be part of that divine godly family relationship. The position that God sets forth here for the woman does not necessarily mean that the woman cannot have a balanced measure of independence.

There are conditions in which a woman can do this and still support her husband within the marriage relationship. For instance, she can increase the family income at a time when the children are going through college, or she can pursue her own interests.

However, if the two come into conflict, that is, if the wife’s career hurts the career of the husband or if her interests lessen her concern for his work and the goals he is pursuing, then the wife is to yield to him in exactly the same way she should yield if her interests come into conflict with the way marked out for her by Jesus Christ.

If someone says, “But that isn’t fair!” The answer is that it is not unfair, because that is the way God made things. No wife will be truly happy in her marriage until she is willing to let God trim her interests wherever necessary in order to be mentally and spiritually balanced.

All this is only one side of the relationship, of course, because if God sets a high standard before the woman, He sets an even higher standard before the man. The wife is to love and respect her husband and submit to him as she loves and respects Christ and submits to Christ. But the husband is to love and sacrifice for his wife as Christ loved us and gave Himself for us.

The husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church, and most wives will have little difficulty in obeying a man who is willing to die for them. Your wife should be your best friend. You are very familiar with verse 13 of John 15.

John 15:13 “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.”

Christ says we are His friends, certainly then, a wife should be her husband's friend. If you are not friends in your marriage, then there is something wrong in your marriage.

Another aspect of this relationship is that the husband is not to criticize his wife, especially not publicly. In fact, he is to be her shield and defender.

Paul says in Ephesians 5 that Christ gave Himself for the church, not that He might criticize it, but to make her holy. Christ never criticized the church. He may have pointed out to individuals that there are things that need to be worked on, but He never criticized the church publicly.

Ephesians 5:25-28 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself.

That is how husbands should treat their wives, loving them as parts of themselves. For since a man and his wife are now one, a man is really doing himself a favor and loving himself when he loves his wife.

God holds husbands responsible for the defense of their wife and, to some degree, also for her spiritual growth and understanding. An equally important verse for husbands is in I Peter 3.

I Peter 3:7 Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel [that does not mean mentally, it means that in general she needs the help of her husband in certain areas], and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered.

Simply put, this means that God will not even hear the prayers of a man who is too ignorant to know how to treat his wife or too foolish to value her as the greatest gift God has for him on this earth.

What does it mean to dwell with a wife with understanding? The KJV says: “according to knowledge,” the ESV says: “in an understanding way.” The AMP expands it somewhat: “live considerately with your wives, with an intelligent recognition of the marriage relation.”

Husbands must do those little things for their wife that do not necessarily mean as much to you, but that are everything to the wife. Marriage is a God-given privilege and God does not grant a privilege without a corresponding obligation.

What then are the obligations of the husband? Let us briefly notice three things related to this. First, he must be understanding. He must be considerate and sensitive to the feelings of his wife. Understanding and considerateness over time forges an unbreakable bond. The cruelty which is hardest to bear is often not deliberate but the product of sheer thoughtlessness.

Secondly, he must be noble. He must remember to treat his wife with courtesy. There might be an astounding conversion of our homes and our society if only men would learn to treat their wives properly; magnanimously. Paul tells us to meditate on whatever is noble. We are to reason and contemplate how to be noble. In doing this, we must give honor to our wife.

Third, he must remember that his wife has equal spiritual rights. She is an heir together with him of the grace of life.

Romans 8:16-17 The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.

Unless a man fulfills these obligations, there is a barrier between his prayers and God. The moans of an offended wife come between the husband's prayers and God's hearing. Our relationship with God can never be right if our relationship with our spouse is wrong. James says, "The fruit of righteousness is sown in peace." There must be peace and love between a husband and wife for the fruit of the Spirit to come to maturity.

Husbands should understand and be considerate of their wives' spiritual, emotional, and physical needs.

I might add here that even an unmarried woman can still come to the point of being spiritually mature and develop the fruit of the Spirit to maturity, with God's help.

Some of what I have said will apply to those who are not married but who are thinking about it. If you are in this category, you must hold these great standards of marriage up before you and evaluate the one you are thinking of marrying in the light of them. It takes maturity to do this. Are you mature enough?

Ladies: You must look at that guy and ask, "Can he be as Jesus Christ to me? Can he be for me a man whom I can obey and to whom I can submit, subordinating many of my interests to his?" If you cannot, look elsewhere. Do not marry a man-boy; he is someone who is obsessed with entertainment and is all about fun and he will disappoint you.

Gentlemen: Can you truthfully ask yourself, "Am I willing to give of myself for her? Do I love her enough and respect her enough to die for her? Am I willing to be patient with her and even to cover up her faults as God instructs me to do?" If you cannot say those things, then it is not right for you to marry her.

Some of you are beyond the stage of dating and the early years of marriage and may be facing problems with the raising of your children. You must not let the difficulties you encounter deter you from the right course of action. Your children should never rule over you parents. If your children are the decision makers in your family, you are not functioning as a true Christian family.

Finally, there will be some for whom these words seem too late. In your case love has died, and there seems to be nothing that will rescue your marriage from that void. Your only hope is to yield to our God and Father and to our Savior Jesus Christ and let them rekindle a love that has grown cold and make alive love that has died.

As you yield to Christ and grow in grace and knowledge, that love maybe rekindled, and you may learn that Christ is able to bring life out of death, love out of hate, and a true Christian marriage out of pretense and hostility.

If you will yield to Christ and His standards, He will begin by making of you a new creation and then, end by making all things new!