

# Marriage

**By Malcolm H. Watts**

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Dear Friends,

In my last letter I stressed how important it was for Christians to marry Christians. But it is not true that people can expect to build a successful marriage merely because they are both Christians. Both common sense and common experience tell us there must be a lot more to it than that.

John Wesley was once approached by a man who was not sure whether he ought to marry a certain woman. "I advise you not to marry her", was Wesley's response. "But she is a Christian", the man replied.

Wesley sighed and said: "God can live with many that neither you nor I could live with!" There was not only wit but a great deal of wisdom in this remark. You must both be right with God; but you must also be right for each other.

The book of Genesis informs us that immediately before the institution of marriage, God said: "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him" (Gen 2:18). Two words, note: there is no such word as "helpmeet." The word translated "meet" means literally "as his front", i.e. one corresponding to him or adapted to him. Bishop Wordsworth comments: "A help-mate exactly adapted to his moral and spiritual nature; literally, "a help as over against him, before him", so as to "meet"

him, "tally" and "correspond" to him as his counterpart." Here is the first hint of the need for suitability.

This is underlined in the account of the creation of woman. "The Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; and the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman ..." (Gen 2:21, 22). The Hebrew word translated "rib" is used later of the "planks" and "beams" in Solomon's temple (1 Kings 6:15; 7:3). They were so carefully "prepared" that they fitted exactly into the building (1 Kings 5:18; 6:7). Now in the narrative of Eve's creation we read how God made ready (literally, built) a "rib", and when at last he brought Eve to Adam, they seemed to fit together like two parts of a building. Adam was absolutely overjoyed, and cried out: "This is now bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." (Gen 2:23).

The verse which follows, "therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Gen 2:24), may contain the words of Adam, Moses (the inspired historian), or God Himself. Genesis does not make it clear. Whoever said it, it is quoted by our Lord in the New Testament as the authoritative expression of God's will (Matt 19:5; cf. 1 Cor 6:16). God ordained that two people should "cleave" together

(or, "be glued together") to form an indissoluble union – "one flesh". So there really is a sense in which the woman is the man's other half. Ideally, there should be a perfect match.

In the first marriage neither party had a choice. We have. Here are some pointers to finding the right person:

1) Love. This is very important. There must be mutual attraction, and delight in one another more than in anything or anyone else. George Whitefield had quite the wrong idea when he wrote proposing marriage in these terms: "I bless God, if I know anything of my own heart, I am free from that foolish passion which the world calls love. I write only because I believe it is the will of God that I should alter my state ..." He was, of course, turned down! For a while the poor man felt bitter disappointment, but his own words clearly showed this was not the woman for him. In marked contrast, in the story of Isaac and Rebekah we read these poignant words: "he loved her" (Gen 24:67). It was a good sign and it led to a happy marriage.

2) Friendship. Choose someone you already enjoy as a friend. In the Bible true friendship is regarded as the basis of marriage. Malachi 2:14, for example, describes a wife as a man's "companion". The word denotes "a close friend, with whom interests good or bad are shared." Such was Mary Moffatt, wife of the famous

missionary Dr. Robert Moffatt. In the biography of her husband she is described as "his loving and faithful companion for upwards of fifty years." Marriage is life-long friendship – so choose a friend.

3) "Mutual contentment in each other."

This was how Robert Bolton, the Puritan, put it. It is a mistake for a couple to be always on their own, but when they are they should be fully satisfied with each other's company. The Bible says: "Rejoice with the wife of thy youth. Let her be as the loving hind or pleasant roe (i.e. one's chief delight)" (Prov 5:18,19). Perhaps few came so close to the ideal as George Muller in his relationship with Mary Groves, whom he married in 1830. Dr. Pierson observed that "in their case the days of courtship were never passed ... Their happiness in God and in each other was perennial, perpetual, growing as the years fled by."

4) Helpfulness. It is foolish to contemplate marrying someone who is unthoughtful and mean. Marriage does not work automatically: what makes it work is genuinely unselfish love which longs to help the other partner. The husband looks after the wife (Eph 5:28,29 "Nourisheth – Nourishes it, within. Cherisheth – Cherishes it, without" (J.A. Bengel). Together, the words suggest complete care); and the wife, as we have already seen, is a "help" to her husband (Gen 2:18). Paul puts it like this: "He that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife ... but she that is married

careth for the things of the world, how she may please her husband" (1 Cor 7:33,34). I suspect Calvin had this in mind when, in a letter to his friend Farel, he described the kind of woman he wanted to marry. "The only beauty that attracts me is this", he wrote, "that she should be modest, obliging, not arrogant, thrifty, patient and careful for my health"(!). He found these qualities in Idelette de Bure. When she died in 1549, after only nine years of married life, Calvin paid tribute to her in these words: "I have been deprived of my excellent life companion who, if it had been necessary, would have faced with me not only exile and poverty, but even death. As long as she lived she was my faithful helper ..."

5) Respect. This is vital. The man, although he has responsibility for loving leadership, should not look down on the woman as some kind of inferior; and the woman should not find it in her heart to despise or insult the man. They must have a tender and reverent regard for one another. This is what hallows and preserves a relationship. The Bible fastens attention upon words like "reverence" and "honour" (Eph 5:33; 1 Pet 3:7; cf. Gen 29:31 — "hated", or "slighted"; 1 Chron 15:29). It is when people value each other highly that they give themselves to one another unreservedly: and that is what married life is all about. "The relationship," as Dr. Jowett says, "is a mutual ministry of honour, each willing to be lost in the good and happiness of the other."

In his Memoirs, Thomas Boston gratefully acknowledges the "all-wise Providence" which thirty years before had "yoked" him with his wife: "a woman of great worth", he adds, "whom I therefore passionately loved, and inwardly honoured." There lies the secret of real fellowship in marriage.

6) Faithfulness. This is just as indispensable. If there is doubt or suspicion between the parties, it is the height of folly to proceed. What hope can there be of future marital happiness? According to the Bible, marriage is a "covenant" (Prov 2:17; Mal 2:14). It is a close and intimate association established upon solemn promises. The contracting parties pledge love and loyalty to one another. It is essential that they have confidence in each other, not only on the wedding day, but throughout their married life. "Doubt damns marriage. The mutual trust must be absolute. If the house of marriage be not founded upon that rock, it will collapse in pitiful ruinousness" (Dr. Dinsdale Young). William Cary once said that during the thirteen years of his union with Charlotte, his wife, they had enjoyed true happiness, "never having a single circumstance which either of them wished to conceal from the other."

7) Sense of fulfilment. Both should experience this. In bringing together their different gifts, qualities and temperaments a couple should find real satisfaction and enrichment. Apart, each should feel strangely "alone", but together they should both feel that wholeness which the

Bible describes as "one flesh" (Gen 2:18,24). In a God-designed relationship, the one meets the needs, or supplies the deficiencies, of the other (e.g. Gen 24:67; 1 Sam 1:8; Job 2:9,10; 1 Cor 14:35). In the Life of Christmas Evans written by E. Ebrard Rees, there are some interesting things said about Evans' wife, Catherine. Rees observes: "In a real meaning Catherine was his better half ... She maintained order in his disordered personality. When her husband returned from his journeyings tired and weary, she knew how to calm and revive him; when he was unnerved by his many trials, she put new life and determination into him; when he was irritated by the small, gritty troubles of church organization, she was a balm to his soul. She was stability to his inconstant temperament. She prevented his head being turned with his victories and stopped his heart breaking when defeat came his way ..."

The "pointers" above are not, of course, exhaustive, and much more could be said. But let me bring this letter to a close by reminding you that only God can arrange a happy marriage (Gen 24:14, 44; Prov 18:22; 19:14) and that therefore those seeking life-partners should bring their need to God in prayer. "In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths" (Prov 3:6).

Yours through his grace alone,

Malcolm H. Watts

O God who didst from Adam's side  
Fashion an help-meet for his bride,  
Flesh of his flesh, bone of his bone,  
That both might feel and love as one.  
(Conder)



