

Marriage

Malcolm H. Watts

First choose your love and then love your choice.

IT cannot be stressed how important it is 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 helpmate 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 lifelong 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 (Proverbs 3:6).

*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.*

(Josiah Conder 1789 -1855)

One of the Puritans suggested that marriage may have been derived from “merry-age” because it involves someone coming to make our age merry! The etymology is perhaps more than suspect, but he was right about one thing, marriage is meant to increase our happiness. In proof take one of the laws of the Old Testament. It exempts a newly-married man from military service so that he can “cheer up his wife” i.e. make his wife happy (Deut 24:5). The woman too has a part to play. Her husband should be able to rejoice with her being ravished (literally “lost” i.e. being transported out of himself) by her love. (Proverbs 5:18, 19) Mutual happiness is certainly the divine ideal.

Of course, Christians need to be realistic. “Look not for perfection in your relation”, said a New England pastor to one young couple. “God reserves that for another state where marriage is not needed”! The point must be conceded, but it is nevertheless possible to be very happily married. John Paton, the missionary, once spoke of his married life as “cloudless and happy”. Dinsdale Young was able to say: “Ours has been a supremely happy home. If

there has ever been tempest without always it has been sunshine and calm within our dwelling.”

What we ask is the secret of a happily married life? It is not affinity or compatibility, as many people maintain today. According to the Bible it is submission to God’s government and obedience to his commandments. Noteworthy in this connection is the way Paul precedes his teaching on husband-wife relationships with an emphasis on “submitting yourselves to one another in the fear of God” which really hallows and inspires marriage. When two people live together in the constant awareness of god’s presence, awed and impressed by the authority of His Word, their married life will be properly ordered and so as to bring happiness.

The duties common to both husband and wife are:

Loving Care. “Husbands love your wives” (Eph 5:25) “Teach the young women to love their husbands” (Tit 2:4). As Henry Venn once said “Love is the life of marriage”. But it is not the love of romance, for that love cannot, as in these verses, be commanded and imposed as a duty. No, what the apostle has in mind is a higher love, marked by tenderness and manifested in kindness. It is the love which really cares – “in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18). One way in which this love is expressed is sympathy. This is, of course, a vital part of our “helping” each other (Gen 2:18; 1Sam 1:8). We should try to understand the pressures which can come upon our loved one (Proverbs 31:12; 1 Pet 3:7) and take the necessary steps to relieve, strengthen and comfort (1 Cor 7:33; Gal 5:13b; 6:2). Dr Candlish’s biographer tells of his “happy home life” and suggests two contributing factors. In the first place, as a friend once observed, “a more loving husband... could not have been”; and in the second place, the Doctor was blessed with “a peaceful, restful, fireside, where sympathy and love were granted him”.

A sharing of life. We are told that husband should

“dwell” with their wives and that wives should be “keepers at home” (1 Pet 3:7; Tit 2:5). Included here is the important duty of spending time together. In these days, when the temptation of each partner is to have personal friends and therefore to engage in separate social activities, this needs to be stressed. Certainly the Bible stresses it, insisting that the essence of marriage is companionship (Mal 2:14). If a husband and wife are rarely together, it is difficult to see how theirs can be a proper and satisfying relationship. Married couples need to learn that it is “togetherness” which brings happiness. Scripture teaches that and experience confirms it.

I recall reading of John McNeil, the Scottish preacher, that “amid all his wanderings, his heart ever turned homeward”. His daughter remembered that, after a preaching tour, he would return, and looking around, he would say; “Well, I’ve stayed in grand hotels and with wealthy people in lovely houses, but somehow Mother’s makes ours, beat the lot hollow. She knows how to make a home!”

Communication. This is an overworked word but it is difficult to think of a better one. Sadly, it is possible for two people to live in the same house and yet never really talk about things – at least, not about things which matter. The reason may be natural reticence, noisy and demanding children, business pressure of one kind or another, or (as is often the case) Too much television. But whatever it is, the failure to communicate is a big problem and likely to bring serious misunderstanding. Husbands and wives should sit down and talk; and if they cannot find the time, then they must make the time. Their marriage may well depend upon it. “In the marriage relationship” says Dr Wayne Mack, “communication may be termed survival. It is not optional but vital. It is the life stream, the nerve, the heart beat. Where it is lacking, the marriage relationship deteriorates and dies. Where it is healthy, the marriage relationship flourishes, and the two become one”. It was said of Dr Parker,

Minister of the City Temple, that he found in his wife a “kindred spirit” to whom he could “unburden himself”. If he had a new idea, he always discussed it with Emma whom he used to call “my pastor at home”. This is surely as it should be.

“God said to Abraham... In all the Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice”; “Then the woman came and told her husband”, “Then said Elkanah her husband to her, Hannah, why weepest thou?” “if they (women) will learn anything, let them ask their husband at home”, “Ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge” (Gen 21:12; Judges 13:6; 1 Sam 3:8; 1 Cor 14:35; 1 Pet 3:7)

General and constant helpfulness. After Adam was created, God said: “I will make a meet help for him” (Gen 2:18). So from the beginning the wife’s role was one of assistance, looking after her husband and the family. But as Calvin reminds us, although wives should do all they can to help, “it is also the part of the men to consider what they owe in return”. Husbands should nourish and cherish their wives which means lovingly seeing to their various needs, making sure they have all the necessary provision and protection (Eph 5:29). “The Lord grant”, said Naomi to her daughters in law, “That each of you may find rest (freedom from care and trouble) in the house her husband” (Ruth 1:9). The Bible therefore makes it clear that the duty of helping belongs to both parties.

George Swinnock observing how the scripture likens marriage to a “yoke” (2 Cor 6:14), makes this comment: “Married persons should draw evenly and equally, and therefore the load will be carried more lightly.” What a difference it would make if husbands sometimes helped their wives about the house, and if wives occasionally relieved their husbands of business burdens! William Jay wrote in his autobiography; “I must have been one of the basest of men had I not always endeavoured to act

worthily towards the wife on my youth, to whom I am under so many obligations.”

True respect. There is a rather curious case related in the Fenstanton Records, the minute book of the Baptist church at Fenstanton (1644-1694). Thomas Green and his wife were accused of “such contention”, as that they publically railed exceedingly, the one against the other, to the great dishonour of God and the scandal of his truth.” On hearing of it, the church sent two members “sharply to reprove them for that great offence and to admonish them of their evil and likewise of their duty”. Such behaviour was unacceptable in 1657 and it is so today. God commands the Christian husband, in his feelings and general conduct to honour his wife (1 Pet 3:7). He should therefore value her, give her proper consideration and always act towards her with politeness and courtesy. “Husbands love your wives and be not bitter against them” (Col 3:19). As for the wife, “Let the wife see that she reverence her husband” (Eph 5:33). This too involves respect, and it will manifest itself in a determined and consistent effort to please (1 Cor 7:34 cf v35). Now I know we all fail; but if we only gave more thought to our respective duties, we would have far happier marriages.

It cannot but be observed that some marriage partners are altogether selfish: they want to go on behaving as if they were still single. Regardless of the hurt and sorrow caused to the other person, they insist on finding the time for their own particular activities, hobbies and pleasures. This self-centred approach to life is not only destructive of mutual happiness; it is a denial or negation, of marriage itself. “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). Make no mistake about this, selfishness, particularly in a marriage, is an ugly, nasty, sin. When one party wants to do his own thing, even though burdens, upsets and grieves the other party; it seriously threatens peace

and actually fractures the marriage. “If any man will come after me let him deny himself...” (Matt 16:24), “Let no man seek his own...” (1 Cor 10:24), Charity doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own.. (1 Cor 13:5), Look not every man on his own things... (Phil 2:4). Selfishness is like a serpent, will kill any and every good relationship. Destroy it – or it will destroy your marriage, when you have no one to blame but yourself.

Scripture teaches that selfless love is the secret of living together in peace and with joy. Philip Henry (the father of the famous common ‘tater) thought so highly of his wife that he never ceased to give thanks to God for her. In his journal, he wrote, “We have been so long married, and never reconciled, that is, there has never been any occasion for it.”

Faithfulness in everything. As far as close relations are concerned, it goes without saying that marriage partners should keep only and strictly to each other. “Drink waters out of thine own cistern and running waters out of thine own well”. (Proverbs 5:15; cf. Ex 20:14; Matt 19:6, Heb 13:4). But faithfulness includes more than this.

In all circumstances, the husband and wife should stand by one another, each giving the other the necessary defence and support. Abraham is described as a covering for Sarah (Gen 20:16) and it is evidently to Abigail’s praise that she tried to avert the calamity threatening her husband, Nabal, even though that man seems to have been an absolute fool (1 Sam 25:18-35). In good times and bad times, husbands and wives must cleave to each other (Gen 2:24). It is a tragic violation of marriage when one spouse publically criticises or censures the other.

Let each of us see to it that we are never guilty of that. Rather take the example of George Whitfield’s wife. On one occasion, a mob gathered and stones began to fly. The preacher began to be afraid, but Elizabeth stood resolutely and defiantly at his side. She pulled his gown, and cried out: “Now George play the man of God!”

Fellowship in prayer. There should be attendance together at public worship (1 Sam 2:19; Luke 1:7). However there should also be more private worship in the home. Of all the duties we have considered, this is one of the most important. Scripture says that if you are married, you should be careful to fulfil your responsibilities, “so that your prayers be not hindered” (1 Peter 3:7). Now what is this but a reference to united prayer? It is good for Christian couples to set aside a time each day when they can pray together. It will maintain their communion with God; it will also maintain their communion with each other. If regularly performed, God will surely honour it and there is no telling what blessing shall come upon the marriage. Robert Newton, the Wesleyan preacher, and his wife, began marriage with a determination to pray each day with and for each other. By the grace of God they were enabled to continue that practice throughout all their lives. When an old man, Newton remarked, “In the course of a short time, my wife and I, shall celebrate the jubilee of our marriage; and I know not, that during the fifty years of our union, an unkind look, or an unkind word, has ever passed between us.”

The law is the lamp, and the commandment the light by which married happiness can be ensured.