

IS THERE LIFE AFTER MARRIAGE?

Keys to a Healthy Relationship

by Steve Hixon



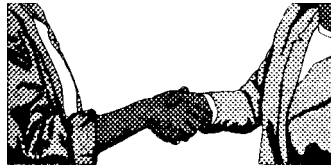
Looking at Current Issues from a Biblical Perspective

THE MYTHS OF MARRIAGE

Bill Hybels points out in his recent book Fit To Be Tied that people look for another person to fill their emptiness. We tend to think that if we just find the right marriage partner, our loneliness will end, our brokenness will be healed, and our happiness will be ensured.

Another myth is that when the real Mr. or Miss Right comes along, we will be swept away, a feeling "bigger than both of us" will come over us, and we won't have to make a decision so much as accept a perfect gift. This notion of finding God's perfect mate is even perpetuated in Christian circles by the teaching that God has one person on earth for you to marry. As this teaching goes, finding that person through persistent prayer will ensure a blissful, blessed lifetime relationship; the corollary is obvious: marrying the "wrong person" will doom you to a back seat in God's plan, a second-class existence. Some have even concluded, usually in the midst of conflict, that they must have missed God's choice mate. Hence they get a divorce and go off on the search again.

ARE YOU COMPATIBLE?



CHECK THE LIST BEFORE TAKING OFF!

A good pilot, even if he is excited about the upcoming flight, wisely chooses to look at every item on his checklist. He knows that one small mistake can lead to serious consequences. Likewise, the process of buying a home is purposefully tedious - it is designed to protect buyer and seller from unseen problems. How many excited new homeowners are later despondent when they find they share the home with termites? In the same way, a man and woman in love need to take a good look at each other before they commit to a lifetime together. Are they compatible in the following areas?

ATTRACTION

There's nothing wrong or unspiritual about being thrilled with your spouse's face, form, and personality. The Song of Solomon is a love poem which celebrates sexuality in marriage. God made men and women to be attracted to each other.

SPIRITUALITY

Is the person you are considering marrying a Christian? 2 Corinthians 6:14 warns against being "unequally yoked" to a non-believer. In other words, a lack of agreement on such a central issue will eventually make both people miserable. Do you find yourself talking about Christ? Is He as much a part of your life as your partner's?

CHARACTER

A wedding ceremony doesn't change anyone. The person you commit yourself to will basically be the same person after the wedding as they were before. Standing at the altar, could you honestly say, "If they don't change at all from the way they are right now, it will be OK with me."? You should get to know a person's track record. Have they actually lived according to the values they say they believe in?

COMMUNICATION

Most young couples love to communicate, but rarely about areas of conflict. Is there a mutual commitment to resolving disagreements? Do you have the skills to negotiate? If not, you may be headed for trouble.

FAMILY

This area is the single biggest influence on a person's life. It is also the single greatest source of a person's pain. Was your family highly controlled? Was it chaotic? Was it a model to follow or do you want to do everything differently?

TEMPERAMENT

An extrovert gets energy from being with lots of people, while an introvert is drained by crowds and "refuels" in solitude. Some people want to plan and be highly organized, others like to take life as it comes. Who is right? Who is more spiritual? Neither! But unless you understand your mate, you may make moral issues out of mere personality differences.

TIME

Last but not least, nothing can substitute for time spent together. You can't really get to know someone unless you see them in a variety of situations, relationships, and settings. How do they react under stress? How do they deal with conflict? You also need honest feedback from friends and family as they observe your relationship. And the only way to do that is to give yourselves time.

A BIBLICAL VIEW OF MARRIAGE

Teaching on marriage often runs the gamut of extremes. On one end is the modern view of men and women, which acknowledges nothing but minor biological differences between the sexes, and hence no difference at all between husbands and wives. On the other, more conservative end, is the view which delineates very strictly defined roles, with distinct boundaries. This view often reinforces stereotypical cultural views of men and women, and encourages dysfunctional relationships. As J.I. Packer says, *"Legalism always reduces life to role-play."* The Biblical view is one which is balanced between the two. Differences between men and women are acknowledged, as well as differing descriptions of what it means to be a husband or wife. However, women are seen as the moral, spiritual, and intellectual equals of men. There is dignity and freedom as well as distinct differences. Consider Peter's words to husbands *"Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers."*

Ephesians 5 is probably the best-known New Testament passage regarding marriage:

5:21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. 22 Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord 23 For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

25 "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. 28 In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church - 30 for we are members of his body.

31 "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh

32 This is a profound mystery - but I am talking about Christ and the church. 33 However, each one of you must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband "

"The husband should take the initiative and contribute toward keeping unity and love in the marriage relationship. Peter well sees what best befits a man and what he should most diligently strive to do.- give honor to his wife. He says you husbands should dwell with your wives according to knowledge and should not desire to rule over them with a headstrong will. You are her husband in order to help, support and protect her. In this matter no one can lay down a rule for you. You yourself must learn how to act with reason.

Martin Luther

Mutual submission should be the attitude of a Christian man and woman whose lives are characterized by a yieldedness to God and therefore a gentle attitude towards one another. Remember Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount? *"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."* The mark of God's Spirit is a quiet, controlled confidence, a meekness which is not weakness, a willingness to listen and cooperate rather than a desire to overpower and exploit.

WHAT'S A HUSBAND TO DO?

When Paul writes God's challenge to the man, he used a Greek word not usually associated with marriage. *"The rabbis"*, writes William Barclay, *"asserted that money, the contract, and intercourse make marriage. When they enumerated what else a man "owed" to his wife, they seldom mentioned "love."* The normal terms for love were **storge** (love of the familiar), **phileo** (brotherly love, camaraderie), and **eros** (sexual love). But **agape**, Paul's term in verse 25, was the term for divine love. *"Agape love is not primarily an emotion, rather it shows itself in concrete action rendered on behalf of the other."*

The husband is called the head of the wife, but he is not told to become the head or to demand his rights. His challenge is to love as Christ loved, and loves, the church. He is, as Jim Dethmer says, to "lay down his life and lift up his wife." Norman Wright, in

Communication: Key to Your Marriage, comments: *In Ephesians 5, Paul does not emphasize the husband's authority over his wife. Instead Paul focuses on the husband's responsibility to have a self-giving love for his wife... As the husband, you do not demand obedience. You do not order your wife to respect your authority. You do not say "Be submissive and obedient and then I will love you as Scripture tells me to." Instead, you focus on your responsibility to give love. You give your wife the freedom to decide to submit to you. Submission is her responsibility, not yours."*

WHAT'S A WIFE TO DO?

Wives, likewise, are told, to respond to their husbands in the same way they respond to Christ, with respect and submission. Wright continues: *"The Scriptures say submit, but they do not say sell out. The wife is not to become a nothing, a pawn in her husband's hand. She retains her distinctiveness as an individual with the right to her own ideas and feelings. She is not a servant. She remains a person with a distinct personality and personal needs. She needs to accept responsibility and make decisions a much as her husband does."*



COMMUNICATION

Submission is not a natural thing to most people. One person has defined it as: "Power I refuse to exercise for a higher purpose." The world's ways of submitting include: 1. manipulation ("I'll get my way through deceit"), 2. servility ("I'm not worthy"), 3. concession, ("I'd rather give in than fight"), and 4. resignation ("I'm sitting down on the outside, but I'm standing up on the inside"). But Biblical submission is different. It is a choice to serve made from a sense of dignity and love. Gilbert Belizikian sums up well: *Paul is saying here that the submission of the church to Christ and of the wife to husband is something more demanding and different from obedience to codes, or conformity to authority, or acceptance of rulership. It is the disposition of one's whole being for another's sake, the espousing of total servanthood in every dimension of shared lives, a life orientation of service joyfully assumed in response to love. Any pagan wife can submit to the authority of a husband. Only a Christian wife can submit to her husband in servanthood "as to the Lord."*

WHAT ABOUT WHEN YOU CAN'T AGREE?

Some teaching on marriage gives the impression that one-sided, authoritative, "executive" decisions made by the husband against the wife's wishes are an almost daily occurrence. However in good marriages, this kind of "executive decision" is extremely rare, if not non-existent. The better the communication, the less likely it will come to this. However, Jim Hurley proposes the following scenario should it come to this:

Husband: *"Not because I am inherently wiser or more righteous, nor because I am right (although I do believe I am or I would not stand firm), but because it is finally my responsibility before God, we will take the course which I believe right. If I am being sinfully stubborn, may God forgive me and give me the grace to yield to you."*

Wife: *"Not because I believe you are wiser in this matter (I don't) or more righteous, nor because I accept that you are right (because I don't or I would not oppose you), but because I am a servant of God who has called me to honor your headship, I willingly yield to your decision. If I am wrong, may God show me. If you are wrong, may he give you the grace to acknowledge it and to change."*

"Is my wife more like Christ because she is married to me? Or is she like Christ in spite of me? Do I sanctify her or hold her back? Is she a better woman because she is married to me? Is she a better friend?"

Kent Hughes

"in an unconscious marriage, you believe that the way to have a good marriage is to pick the right partner. In a conscious marriage you realize you have to be the right partner. As you gain a more realistic view of love relationships, you realize that a good marriage requires commitment, discipline, and the courage to grow and change; marriage is hard work."

Harville Hendrix

Norman Wright describes the atmosphere which results when husbands lead in love and wives respond in love: *"Meet your responsibility and give your mate the freedom to meet his or hers. Then you will build a marriage in which both partners are free to communicate openly and honestly. With good communication, there will be no leadership gap. As husband and wife fulfill their Biblical responsibilities, love and submission intertwine. The result is an atmosphere of trust and security we here both partners grow and mature as God intends."*

Likewise, Harville Hendrix, author of Getting the Love You Want, wisely comments: *"In an unconscious marriage, you cling to the childhood belief that your partner automatically intuitively knows your needs. In a conscious marriage, you accept the fact that, in order to understand each other, you have to develop clear channels of communication."*

GUESS WHAT? MEN & WOMEN ARE DIFFERENT!

Deborah Tannen, author of You Just Don't Understand, says, *"The risk of ignoring differences is greater than the danger of naming them."* Naturally, stereotypes don't always fit the individual. And yet in her studies she has found that men and women see life differently. For men, she writes, life is a contest, a struggle to preserve independence and avoid failure. For women, life is a community, a struggle to preserve intimacy and avoid isolation. Therefore, communication is a continual balancing act, juggling the conflicting needs for intimacy and independence.

Willard Harley, in his book His Needs, Her Needs, records his observations of differing needs for men and women as he has talked with hundreds of couples. The top five needs that wives describe are: affection, conversation, honesty & openness, financial support, family commitment. The top five expressed by men are: sexual fulfillment, recreational companionship, attractive spouse, domestic support, admiration. With such divergent views of life and personal needs, communication is crucial!

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

The Bible has a lot to say about how we communicate. The book of Proverbs is a great "primer" on the power of words to build up, tear down, encourage, discourage, give life and take it away. In the gospels, Jesus was shown to be a master of communication; people marveled at the words he spoke. Interestingly, one of the passages that speaks the most about communication is the one directly preceding Paul's teaching about marriage in Ephesians 5. Listen to these

excerpts from Ephesians 4 and 5: *"speaking the truth in love, we will grow up in Him ... put off falsehood and speak truthfully ... do not let the sun go down while you are still angry ... do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs ... get rid of all rage, brawling and slander ... nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, but rather thanksgiving."*

SENDING & RECEIVING: HEALTHY COMMUNICATION

In any conversation, there are at least six messages being sent and, received: 1. what you meant to say, 2. what you actually said, 3. what the other person heard, 4. what the other person thinks he heard, 5. what the other says about what you said, 6. what you think the other person said about what you said!

The skill of sending messages involves being clear, being specific, being direct. Likewise, receiving messages also involves skill: listening, acknowledging that you've heard, and giving feedback. Ask yourself how you tend to respond when someone expresses feelings. Do you use some of the following phrases, which can easily be interpreted as **rejection**? Do you...

- attack: *"Well, maybe you're right, but you..."*
- advise: *"Maybe you should..."*
- disdain: *"Gee, there's no need to feel..."*
- correct: *"What I think you really mean is..."*

"To keep your marriage brimming, with love in the loving cup, whenever you're wrong, admit it, whenever you're right, shut up!"

Ogden Nash

Responding in a way that communicates **acceptance** may sound like this:

- reflecting: *"It sounds as if you feel..."*
- clarifying: *"Are you saying that...?"*
- exploring: *"When else do you feel...?"*
- extending: *"Did you also feel...?"*

According to Willard Harley we become "enemies" of good communication when we use conversation to punish, force agreement, and dwell on mistakes. On the other hand, we become "friends" of good conversation when we develop an interest in the other person's interests, balance the conversation between people, seek to inform, investigate, and understand, and give the other person our undivided attention.

WHEN SPARKS FLY: RESOLVING CONFLICT

Robert Lewis Stevenson called marriage "a long conversation chequered by disputes." While that may sound a bit jaded, it is nevertheless true that healthy couples are skillful at dealing with conflict.

Do you tend to react in one of the following ways when tensions run high? Do you try to freeze the other person out, engage in a shoot-out, escape by leaving, or even resort to violence?

A positive pattern of conflict resolution usually begins with affirming the other person I and exhibiting a willingness to take at least some of the blame yourself. You should express hurt instead of hostility, make clear, direct statements (rather than sweeping generalizations), and say "I feel", rather than "you never" or "you always". And there's nothing wrong with seeking counsel if you don't seem to be getting anywhere.

CONCLUSION

When the disciples heard Jesus' hard words about marriage in Matthew 19, their response, essentially, was "Is it worth it?!" Adam's first response to marriage in the Garden of Eden was "This is now bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh!" He was excited because he had finally found someone attractive and complementary. And despite the Fall and the pain it has brought, marriage between redeemed people can mirror that initial excitement and satisfaction. Will it take work? Yes! Does it take prayer and dependence upon God? Yes! Is it worth it.? Listen as Mike Mason writes: *"She is as close as anyone in the world can come to being for me, in that mournful, radiant flesh of hers, what Christ is to me in the spirit."*

RECOMMENDED READING:

- Fit to Be Tied**, Bill Hybels
- The Mystery of Marriage**, Mike Mason
- I Married You**, Walter Trobisch
- All a Man Can Be**, Walter Trobisch
- His Needs, Her Needs**, Willard Harley
- Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective**, James Hurley
- Learning to Live with the One You Love**, Jim Smith
- The Marriage Builder**, Larry Crabb
- Getting the Love You Want**, Harville Hendrix
- As for Me and My House**, Walter Wangerin
- Strike the Original Match**, Charles Swindoll

RECOMMENDED TESTING:

- Prepare / Enrich**
This test highlights the strengths of your relationship and the areas which need work. Cost is \$25.
- Myers Briggs Personality Type Inventory**
Shows which of 16 basic personality types you have.