

HUSBAND AND WIFE IN THE LORD

1—THE THREAT TO MARRIAGE

THE world's marriages are falling apart. One out of every two marriages now contracted in Britain and two out of every three in North America will end in divorce. Behind these statistics lie the tragedy, selfishness and, often, lust of men and women. Inevitably there follow the untold miseries of broken homes and of children adrift from their birthright, the anchor of their parents. Is it any wonder that many of these children develop personal problems, some of which lead to anti-social and criminal tendencies, whilst in later life their own marriages come under stress? Children from broken marriages must wonder what marriage is really about. Can they be blamed when they view with deep scepticism the teaching that marriage is intended to be a lifelong partnership? How can they react otherwise? Marriage to them is at best a gamble against unreckonable odds or at worst a road to sorrow and desolation.

The World and the Brotherhood

All of this may seem to be remote from our own community where the highest standards are set for our conduct and where a large number of happy marriages are to be found. But we would be spiritual ostriches were we to suppose that the world is the world in its practices, the Brotherhood is the Brotherhood and never the twain shall mix.

Broken marriages are already affecting the Brotherhood the world over. There is scarcely a Brother or sister anywhere who does not know of at least one case. In addition, divorce and re-marriage are becoming increasingly frequent and bring ecclesial pain wherever they occur.

This article is *not* about divorce and re-marriage. It addresses itself to the more fundamental problem over which much less time is spent and far less spiritual grey matter is exercised; the problem of marriage itself. Throughout society there is something seriously wrong with its principles of marriage. If we can discover the source of these troubles, we may then be in a position to heal some of the sick marriages in our own midst and to prevent the spreading of disease to others. To this end let us take a look at what is happening and then seek to apply God's gracious remedies as dispensed in His word.

Here are some of the prevalent evils in the complex mix of human behaviour today. All of them are certain to breed discontent, selfishness and strife.

1. Even nominal Christianity has been abandoned by a large part of western society and consequently the discipline of religion has disappeared from everyday life. Every man does that which is right in his own eyes.
2. Bible reading has been a rare occurrence for many years, even when church-going was more common than it is today. Even so, there was always some knowledge of Christian principles and some attempt to observe them. Nowadays, however, even this restraining feature is rapidly vanishing and a mantle of ignorance is settling upon the majority of people.
3. The Bible teaching about the origin of man and of woman has been positively displaced by the theory of evolution. Nothing less than the teaching of Genesis is required for sound marriages.
4. The world is in the grip of wanting things and of reckoning the value of life by "the standard of living", the possession of material wealth. This is no way to happiness. "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." Marriage cannot be built from *things*, however desirable these might appear to be. The building bricks for a good marriage are a constant awareness of God and of Christ, the mutual acceptance of the right spiritual values and a sympathetic fellowship between the man and his wife.
5. The world has destroyed respect for authority, even for proper and good authority, and has thereby undermined the standing of the covenant of marriage. Marriage vows not rooted in God are soon subject to the stress of human vanity and fickleness.

False Hopes and False Aspirations

6. The world is drunk on the wine of equality so-called. This has created false hopes, false aspirations and false theories which some having embraced to try to better themselves, find only that they have been disappointed or, worse still, crushed by the strong or unprincipled who have no real regard for equality but only for self and for constant gain at the expense of others. Many unmarried girls have found themselves bitterly disillusioned in this unequal struggle for equality. Moreover, the call for equality between the sexes in marriage is wholly unscriptural unless it be equality for each to give all in the service of the marriage bond.

7. Women's "lib" is one of the main ingredients in the sorry state of matrimony these days. The aims and assertions of the movement are wide of the mark and run contrary to the teachings of God. In Scriptural terms lack of equality does not betoken a lower spiritual status or mean a loss of advantages or of blessings. The straightforward teaching of the whole of Scripture is that man should be the head of the home. Any human devices or imaginations which teach or practice otherwise will sow the seeds of unhappiness and of possible ruin of the marriage itself.

8. The world has gone completely astray on the subject of sex. It has made the experience as something to be desired for itself, whether or not a person is married. It is regarded as a form of experiment, pleasure or indulgence to which anyone is entitled, as though it were food or recreation. No conditions are attached to it provided that the participants "consent". No responsibility is incurred, no promises are given or recognised and no obligation arises. So people climb into a bed which is neither marital nor undefiled, and share a squalid taking and giving in which the mind is usually excited by mere eroticism and the body by sheer physical stimulation. The meaning and beauty of true union are trailed in the dust and a shabby degradation of the gift of God is the result. Science has made it "safe", but there is still an increasing toll of disease and unwanted children cast upon the waters of life by the selfish indulgence of the thoughtless or irresponsible. Our young people are put under pressure to accept what society accepts and have constantly to find ways to resist the creeping tide of sin in thought and deed.

9. Thus, there are around us a bewildering array of trial marriages, exchanges of marriage partners, bed-sharing by consent, untold promiscuity and the like, all fed by the forsaking of Christian principles and by the sensual messages of the media, the provocativeness of some kinds of dress and by the foolish romanticism and fairy tale imaginations which some young people substitute for true love by indulging in passionate and ephemeral associations.

Brethren and sisters, all of these things and many more are destructive of the sanctity and permanence of marriage. Many of them prepare the mind beforehand to forsake marriage should difficulties or trials arise, as they surely will, or should there be a temptation for a change of heart or a wish for something or someone different. Convenience and not commitment, selfishness and not selflessness, and temporary partnership instead of complete and unreserved giving of one man and one woman to each other for life are the expedients of all parts of society.

These are the pathways to unhappiness for someone: a deceived maiden, a forsaken wife, a husband left with young children to care for, a child bereft of security and true parental love, and an ever widening circle of relations and friends caught up in the effects of the initial misery. It is no use pretending that the close circle of the Brotherhood will remain immune from these things. We shall be affected: we are already affected. Nor is it a remedy for the real ills simply to seek to cope with broken marriages when they occur. We must do something more comprehensive and more basic, something to protect the roots from infection and the tree from blight. It is the responsibility of each ecclesia to ensure that the young are properly instructed and those who intend to marry are given wise counsel. There is real work to do and there is no short cut to the task, no magic word to banish the evil spell in one stroke.

Our children at school are in classes of pupils some of whom are from broken homes, a frighteningly large proportion in some schools. Some of their teachers are separated from their partners, are divorced or are parties to illicit relationships. Young people at work hear every kind of sex talk, know about all sorts of practices among men and women, and meet colleagues and workmates whose marriages have broken up. University and college students know that promiscuity is the normal behaviour of a sizeable part of the student population. Our Sunday School, Youth Circle and ecclesial teaching must provide the antidote to the standards around us and, above all, the personal example of parents and every ecclesial member must show the better way.

It is not sufficient by way of remedy for us to say that a lot of marriages hold fast. They do, but even so a half of Britain's currently contracted marriages and two thirds of those in North America will end in divorce. Even if the Brotherhood is fifty times better than the world around it, there will still be an uncomfortably large problem for us as a community to have to deal with.

2—THE ONLY SURE FOUNDATION

What are we to do? There is only one answer. Bible teaching must be loved and inculcated. Down every other road lie disaster and bitterness for many people. Marriage was instituted by God and He alone has the right to give guidance by which to enter into a true union and afterwards preserve it intact. Let us, first of all, take a look at a very familiar passage of Scripture:

“And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh” ([Gen 2:23,24](#)).

Part of that Scripture is repeated in the New Testament in this form:

“For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was man created for the woman, but the woman for the man” (1Cor 11:8–9).

Here is fundamental teaching which we neglect at our peril. It gives the lie to the world’s standards of equality of the sexes and to the aims of women’s liberation in this respect. There is here a basic fact which nothing can shake off: woman is out of man and is for man. It is not the other way round, nor is it a question of equality. Woman was of man’s flesh and bone; and, therefore, she “belongs” to him in a special way.

Woman feels within herself, by nature, a certain relationship to man. Also, she has inborn qualities of being able to care for and look well to her household and to build a home, qualities of which she is aware whether or not she marries. The instincts are made evident in the games which little girls play, in the way in which an older sister cares for her young brothers and sisters, in the kind of oversight which a daughter exercises over her aged parents, or an unmarried daughter shows in the selfless devotion of herself for a surviving parent. There are untold works of compassion and sympathy which come so beautifully from the heart and hands of womankind.

Woman’s Special Qualities

The potential for this lay in Eve before she sinned but has since been expressed by her fallen daughters. Moreover, the sin in Eden added new dimensions and constraints to woman’s world:

“I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception ... thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.”

Woman’s special sensitiveness and the qualities given to her by God, blessings as they were intended to be, were to become the source of grief and pain to her. Furthermore, childbearing potential was to be increased. Whether this was simply by augmenting her fruitfulness or by heightening the human sexual urge or by both or neither, the Scripture does not say. It is nevertheless true: God says so. Thus woman is inescapably dependent upon man and has a natural instinct whereby she seeks a haven in him. She has also, beyond anything which a man normally experiences, a God-given longing for children.

What, then, of man? What is his position and role according to Scripture? He is fitted for initiative and for leadership, for acting as protector and provider. Besides, he has a sense of need for woman whilst at the same time realising her “otherness”, her strangely wonderful blend of joy and tears, a strength of service and tenderness, and of a beguiling elusiveness and an unbelievable capacity for self-surrender. Every godly man should respect and respond in some degree to woman’s need whenever he meets her, whether as a child, a young woman, a mature person or an aged shadow of her former self.

But what of the position of man in marriage? The Bible says that he must be outgoing to his wife, leaving father and mother in order to cleave to her. The initiative and leadership are his. He must cleave to her. Woman is not primarily responsible for this. She responds to him. Eve was made for Adam and had an in-built responsiveness to him. God made her that way.

So, when a man and a maid have agreed to marry, provided that this consent is based upon a proper understanding one of another and not upon a frivolous or capricious undertaking, the woman will respond when the man cleaves to her. She will find shelter in him whilst at the same time meeting his special need. This is the divinely ordained process. Our world in its mad scramble for equality and sameness has dismissed God’s way, and consequently has made shipwreck of countless marriages.

It will be observed that this understanding of Scripture places the main responsibility upon the husband. The wife's responsibilities derive from her husband and are no less real. Man's authority is not one of sheer domination over his wife. There is nothing of harshness, oppression, self-centredness or mastery. He is the lord of love in his home and he has cast his mantle around his beloved. He has made promise that he will care for her and create such circumstances as will allow her to respond with her love for him by building a home within the ambit of his provision for her. He supplies strength and overall guidance in such a way as to fulfil the divine injunctions that husbands should "love your wives" even "as their own bodies". Each husband should give himself for his wife as Christ did for the church and so nourish and cherish her that she may find ample room for the full expression of her tender love and unfailing care as though she were the bride of the Lord himself.

Love Properly Channelled

None of this arises without effort. It requires conscious and deliberate purposefulness whereby love may be properly channelled within divine principles. Men the world over seek to express love for their partners and many of them achieve a measure of success and provide examples of good husbands according to their lights and characters. But husbands who are also disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ have advantages beyond compare in the sweet counsel with which the word abounds and in the examples of godly homes and godly partnerships described therein for our instruction.

Whilst no man can be fully his brother's keeper, there is a particular responsibility which the Bible lays upon the disciple who takes to himself a wife. Knowing that he is able to awaken responses in her, he is to a degree responsible for the process by which the responses are aroused and for the quality and nature of them. Godly counsels should govern the home and the husband must make them plain. The overall wisdom is from Christ and the husband must reflect it. He must ensure that the spirit of worship pervades everything. The Head of the home must be Christ and the husband must make his submission known. Correspondingly, the spirit of prayer and reverence for the word of God must be such as to evoke wholehearted cooperation and submission from the wife. For her part she will see to it that the manner in which she runs the home and the way in which she brings up the family will follow the lead given by her husband. There is thus a partnership based upon a common understanding in which their mutual love and wisdom are harnessed to their common aim to glorify God in all things.

All this may seem to be high-flown and beyond the reach of the average disciple. Perfect fulfilment will elude us but there is nothing, absolutely nothing, to prevent us from setting the ideal as the one thing we desire to achieve from marriage. If we fail to set divine standards, we shall set earthly ones and have earthly sorrows. There is nothing more beautiful and moving than for a young man and woman who are betrothed to hold hands before God and to do so in prayer, in common devotion and with solemn promise to take Christ and his ways into the life they plan to share.

Youth is the time for reaching for the stars, for setting wonderful ideals and for seeking the highest and best things. What better then than for a man to receive his wife as a gift from God and for a woman to thank the Lord for providing a godly companion and guide? Every true Christian husband feels himself unworthy of the gift of his wife and he treats her accordingly. Every true Christian wife finds herself lost in the wonder of God's provision of a husband with whom she may live whilst she awaits her true bridegroom, the Lord Jesus.

Marriage not Ready-Made

It follows from all these considerations that marriage is not something which is provided ready-made on the wedding day. Marriage is a process which continues from the time of the marriage vows until death ultimately intervenes. Marriage is a living partnership of body and mind. The partnership of body should flow from a partnership of mind. Not until our minds are wedded and sealed to one another by lifelong vows should the bodies be sealed in unity. The uniqueness of each person is thus blended into a unique relationship which must not, and indeed cannot by the very nature of things, be shared with anyone else. Marriage is a process of constant adjustment brought about by a fervent desire to assist one's partner to attain unto the Kingdom of God. Thus each must learn to surrender those habits, desires and aims which are not conducive to the spiritual well-being of the marriage and of the other partner. Furthermore, because the needs of each partner are distinct and often different from those of the other partner, each must learn to fill the special needs of the other. For example, a husband who has been out at work all day may find it something of a shock to discover that his wife's one desire when they are together is to go out of the house because she has been confined to it for hours on end. Thoughtfulness and the surrender of self are the constant ingredients of a good marriage.

Marriages break down from a variety of causes but from what has been written in much of the foregoing the husband should be able to identify at an early stage those things which are likely to give rise to trouble and he should be able to remedy or avoid some of the ills from which breakdown arises. Let it be stated clearly that the husband should steer clear of every circumstance which could be a threat to his marriage. Foolish, flippant, or “innocent” friendships with other women, however short-lived such associations might be, are to be utterly repudiated. Every signal by word, deed or whatever other means which could result in a response from one of the other sex should be avoided like the plague. The human body and the human heart are not to be trusted even when the persons involved or likely to be involved would not appear to be mutually attracted or attractable. The seeds of ruin have been sown in the most unlikely ground. Man’s greatest weakness in this respect is his utter vulnerability to women. Therefore, every man should look inwards to his own marriage, create every circumstance to foster its well-being and avoid every place, person or condition which presents a temptation. Furthermore, a man and his wife must be altogether frank one with the other at all times. There should never be anything about which we cannot talk openly and there should be no hidden parts of our lives. Remember that Christ knows everything, instantly and in full.

The Scripture makes it plain that woman is herself susceptible to advances of one kind and another. She is built that way. Therefore she keeps close to her husband and keeps clear of persons and conditions which could expose her to temptation. Men of evil intent are usually quickly and almost intuitively recognised. Unless we are evil ourselves we are not likely to fall victim to them. We are much more likely to find true danger signals in the attractiveness of persons or of circumstances which match something within our own personalities. We should seek not to arouse responses in others or, if we see them arising, we should take steps to curb them. Every woman knows how to do that. The serpent comes in a variety of guises but it always stings.

The Threat of Infidelity

Infidelity is the obvious threat to marriage but it is not the only one. Moreover, infidelity sometimes arises out of conditions caused by the other partner. A wife whose husband has turned cold or thoughtless or has become pre-occupied with business or other pursuits may find herself particularly responsive to outside attractions, improper though these must be. She will certainly be at fault should she fall, but who knows where the primary blame may lie? God certainly does. Let it be remembered that no partner to a marriage has any right to deprive the other partner of any of the just dues of the marriage bond. Not even a brother engaged on the Lord’s work can plead such work as an excuse for neglect of his wife and family. Truly, there are times when pressure may be acute, but there is absolutely no excuse for so arranging the whole of life as to starve one’s partner of love and care and periods of quietness together. Remember, for a Christian his marriage is as much the Lord’s work as any other spiritual exercise. Discipleship is not divisible.

What about the difficulties which arise in marriage? What about them! Life will always have difficulties and a marriage contracted between two sinners who are trying to be saints will surely run into heavy seas from time to time. Firstly, there are the trials which are not of our own making, such as sickness, tragedy within the home or among one’s family, or loss of employment. We do not get married for good health or to avoid tragedy or to guarantee full employment. We cannot. Therefore, when these things come along we have to face them together in prayfulness and faith. If we are not prepared to do this as part of marriage then we should not enter into it. Life is rarely equal or fair, humanly speaking, and we must be prepared for some of the buffeting which inevitably befalls members of the human race. When there are two of us, or more, we increase the chances—looking at things as humans—of ills coming our way. Similarly, our joys may be multiplied. Prayerful and godly lives will prepare us for chastisement and we will find solace and strength in God. Indeed, marriages like discipleship are oft-times improved by trial.

Those who have been married for some time can sometimes provide guidance and assistance for those who come under stress in their early years. Ecclesial life should make us aware of the needs of others and cause us to want to share their burdens. Contrariwise, when powerful difficulties assail those who are older, there may often be need for a little of the vigour and strength with which the young are endowed. God made all of us for one another and we should rejoice in our combined strength and united compassion.

The Problem of Incompatibility

But what of the problem of incompatibility? This term seems to cover a multitude of circumstances and, in the world around us, provides a reason for separation when infidelity does not exist to afford a cause for marital breakdown. It is possible to imagine circumstances in which two persons have become so utterly intolerable to one another that there does not seem to be any point in living together. But, we do not begin the story of marriage at the end. We begin at the beginning. The whole purpose of courtship is to furnish ample time in which to make full assessment one of another. Romance, passion, day-dreaming or simple “hoping” form very insecure ground on which to build a marriage. Partners must take full account of their relative ages and backgrounds, manner of life and personalities, temperaments and health, families and occupations, tendencies and weaknesses, and the hundred and one other things which account for what we are in addition to the truth to which we are committed. It must never be assumed that because we are in the truth we are sure to get along should we get married. Marriage is a human relationship enhanced by spiritual living, but it is still a human relationship.

Nor should we imagine that severe weakness of character or obvious incompatibilities will “all come right once we are married”. Marriage rarely achieves that kind of change. True enough, all of us discover that there are untold blessings which we never thought of, but it is no use setting the marriage ship on course for the rocks in the hope that somehow the rocks will disappear or the direction will change in a way which has never happened during courtship. Courtship is the time to resolve our incompatibilities. It is easier to part at that time than later on when we have brought children into the world. Take stock at the right time.

Furthermore, we must remember that difficulties during marriage are there to be overcome. They must not be allowed to sow the seeds of doubt or of trying to find an escape route from the marriage itself.

Knowing One Another

For these reasons, those who intend to wed should get to know one another’s minds as completely as possible before they are married. Each should ensure that the real person and personality of the intended partner is known, understood and accepted. It is little use hoping that marriage will transform the undesirable or make radical changes in the person we hope to marry. Love seeks and finds, gives and makes known the person of the giver without reservation or conditions or stipulations. It does this before marriage. Love is not suddenly different on the wedding day. Love must be brought to the ceremony by both parties with all their hearts.

Courtship is therefore a sensible and necessary step, a wise overture and a time of mutual education. It is astounding how many of the marriages which go wrong do so because one partner had no idea what the other partner was really like or knew and vainly hoped that marriage “would change all that”. When we marry, we marry the person who comes to the wedding ceremony, not the person we hope to make or the one we dream about. A right and prayerful choice made by quiet and growing acquaintance over an adequate period of time is the secret behind most true marriages.

Courtships have sometimes been unduly long, perhaps by sheer economic circumstances. This can create physical pressures which are not convenient or are hard to bear. Every effort should be made not to expose the mind and body to prolonged expressions of affection and endearment, otherwise nature will create powerful influences which are hard to resist.

Of course, the world around us thinks nothing of pre-marital intercourse. Indeed, how can it when it tolerates or encourages intercourse between those who have no intention to marry? But it should not be so among us. Intercourse is intended only for marriage and is an expression of heart and mind by one person for one person. Pre-marital intercourse destroys the proper joy of marriage. Indiscriminate intercourse, apart from being wholly unChristian and loose, makes nonsense of the sanctity of the marriage bond and encourages unfaithfulness after marriage. Right behaviour begins in the mind. Christian behaviour follows the precepts of Christ.

What then of parents who hand over their homes to parties of young people to do as they will? Latenight or all-night parties are recipes for disaster sooner or later for someone. The privacy of homes is violated when parties are free, unrestrained and unsupervised. These things ought not to be. If any party is not suitable for the presence of the father and mother who own the home, it is not suitable for Christ. Parents who abandon their homes and their young people are forsaking their responsibilities. Discipline and good behaviour do not arise spontaneously, they come from example and precept. Many older brethren and sisters today are mightily grateful for the open-hearted hospitality of good Christadelphian homes of their younger days where they enjoyed marvellous happiness, received unoppressive guidance and leadership, and came away in the gladness of Christ hand-in-hand with their friends.

Time to Take Stock

It is time for all of us to take stock of our homes and our principles. There is nothing like a home full of young people full of life and ideas which they can express around an open Bible and there find signposts for proper living. When older brethren and sisters are willing to discuss the problems and joys of life openly and without fear, they will find that a great burden will be taken from the hearts of the young people with whom they have to deal. Young people need—and most of them want—someone to talk to and very frequently it is someone other than their own parents.

Young married couples too find it invaluable to be able to talk to other married people, often to older people who have passed through the experiences of early marriage or of having children or of changing jobs or of the other staging posts of life's journey in this world. If only those whose marriages run into difficulty would talk to the right people and do so at the right time, one feels that some of the disasters could be avoided.

Occasionally, one has the feeling that some parents do not have the right perspective about their children's marriages. Some mothers seem desperate to get their daughters married and go to all kinds of lengths to effect it. Other parents talk about marriage in terms of mere material possessions and status. Some make the mightiest fuss about the actual wedding ceremony and reception, but very little about the godly content of it all. It is possible to obscure what is really taking place by a whole series of trappings and trimmings which will die with the end of the wedding day. Of course, the wedding has to be an occasion for joy and celebration provided that we have invited the Lord Jesus Christ to attend.

Space forbids us to deal at length with the coming of children upon the marriage scene. Sometimes when marriages are contracted at a thoughtlessly early age, one sees a young, very young, mother having to cope with the task of childbearing and upbringing almost before her own adolescence has run its time. Some mothers can meet this without trouble, others welcome it, but some seem to be unduly harassed and burdened as though they have been robbed of a vital part of youth. This is another of the factors to be thought of before marriage is entered into.

Added Joy, Added Responsibility

Children are meant to bring added joy into marriage and with that joy there is added responsibility. Children are born into the home which we create before they arrive. Coupled with our longing for children should be a longing that they will be willing to follow Christ. To that end we must make Christ live in their presence through our own lives. Godliness, an open and well-loved Bible and constant association in joy with the ecclesia should provide a secure environment in which the plants of childhood can grow. The love and understanding of the parents one for the other and unfailing love for the child will produce a sympathy and a love in the family which will be stronger than anything which the world can show. Moreover, the practice of prayer and dependence upon God in a quiet, unobtrusive but positive way will lead the child to an understanding of the Fatherhood of the Almighty and to a trust in him and in his word in Christ. Family discipline leads to discipleship. A home without discipline is likely to lead to unhappiness and the loss of some or all of the children to the ways of the world.

The matters dealt with in this article merit much greater attention by all of us than these few pages permit. Individuals, whether married or unmarried should think of them as a guide to relationships and personal behaviour; married couples, new and old, should consider them in order that the picture of Christ and his Bride may be reflected during their time of waiting for him to come; parents should think them over in order properly to develop parenthood in Christ; and, ecclesial elders should give attention to them with a view to providing good counsel through ecclesial Bible Class studies and discussion, and by inviting those brethren who conduct wedding services to give wise and clear counsel on those occasions.

[Harry Tennant, *The Christadelphian*, 1978, p406]