

The Triangle of Marriage



The previous two *Bits to Read* asked attention for the role of the husband in marriage and the role of the wife respectively. This *Bit* is devoted to the third party in marriage, the Lord God. Better put, this *Bit* wants to highlight how essential a healthy relation with the Lord is for a healthy marriage.

Biblical?

The relation between husband and wife in marriage was not the first relational institution the Lord created. When God on the sixth day created first the man and then the woman, he also established with them a bond of love, his covenant. In that covenant he would be God to both the man and the woman. This vertical bond between God and the man is the primary relational institution God created. In fact, in the time before the Lord created the woman this vertical relationship between himself and Adam was the only relation that existed. When God created Eve his vertical relation of love with her preceded his giving her in marriage to Adam. Once God gave Eve to Adam in marriage –let’s call that a horizontal relationship– his vertical relationship with each of them were the glue that held the horizontal relationship together. At the heart of marriage is a *threesome* – with husband and wife forming the two base points of the triangle, and the LORD God being the apex of that triangle, and the spouses’ respective relation with God defining the strength of the marriage. In the eye of our mind we’re not to imagine Adam and Eve facing each other in marriage (be it with eyes of love), but we’re to imagine Adam and Eve standing shoulder to shoulder facing God in their marriage – with eyes of adoration on account of the glory of the God they are allowed to serve in their marriage.

This perfect God-centered focus explains the harmony and openness the first husband and wife experienced in their marriage. The two were “one flesh” (Gen 2:24), a phrase that describes the unity of thought, of focus and interest and purpose the two shared, and so unity of body naturally followed. Their singular and shared focus upon their Creator meant they could be totally open with each other, and so being naked was no cause for shame (Gen 2:25). The happiness of their marriage (the horizontal relationship) depended on their focus on the Primary Party in their marriage (the vertical).

Fall

Through their disobedience to God’s command, Adam and Eve broke their relationship with the LORD. Immediately their marital relation was strained. They felt self-conscious before God, exposed and vulnerable, and so sought to hide themselves behind fig leaves (Gen

3:7,10). With their eyes off the Primary Party of their relationship, they ended up seeing the weaknesses of the other, and so began pointing accusing fingers (Gen 3:12). It's not surprising to learn that married couples in this fallen world experience tension and unhappiness and loneliness even in the togetherness of marriage (consider the atmosphere of Lamech's home Gen 4:23,24). The works of the flesh (Gal 5:19-21) boil down to *selfishness* – a characteristic that images so well what Satan is ultimately all about (see Eph 2:2,3). The horizontal relationship is strained, and perhaps broken, because the vertical relationship is damaged. Life outside the Garden is a constant death.

Gospel

In the glorious surprise of the gospel, the LORD God did not respond to this rebellion on the part of his covenant partners by rejecting them in turn; instead, he sought to restore that relationship through giving up his only Son. Through Jesus Christ God the Father “has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:13,14). As a result, that primary vertical relation between God and man is restored! Part and parcel of that restoration is the renewing work of the Holy Spirit, so that the redeemed sinner can again begin to live as God intended him (and her) to live. This reality gives strength again to marriages; what binds husband and wife together once more is their mutual bond with the Lord God. Since the Christian husband and the Christian wife may know themselves to be forgiven of their sins before God through Jesus Christ (that's their core identity), they can again be open with each other. That openness means heart-to-heart *communication* is again possible. “Adam *knew* Eve his wife,” the Holy Spirit tells us, and that means that he could again gauge what was going on in her heart (and she his), each felt safe with the other so that they did not need to hide anything from the other. The result of that intimate sharing of hearts was that they could give themselves to each other – with the blessed result that “she conceived...” (Gen 4:1).

Conflict

The redeemed child of God, though, remains a sinner.¹ One sinner married to a second sinner is a sure recipe for conflict. It's no surprise to learn that that conflict can strain both the horizontal relation between spouses as well as their vertical relation with God. That's why correct response to conflict is so essential. Consider: are the following options helpful?

1. *Criticizing* the spouse as opposed to describing the wrong. Criticizing amounts to playing the person instead of the problem. Since criticism is seen as an attack on the person, tension rises.
2. Developing a feeling of *contempt* for the spouse. The contempt can show itself in name-calling, mocking, belittling (be it in words, sneering voice, rolling the eyes, etc). The spouse senses the contempt, and withdraws within himself (or herself) and has no pleasure in coming home.
3. The guilty party adopts a posture of *defensiveness*, refusing to apologize for the wrong or back down from the conflict. Instead, he/she finds explanation for the wrong behavior, justifying it because of tiredness, upbringing, tension at work, the spouse's orneriness – anything. The result is a standoff between enemies living in the same space. Again, the tension rises.
4. One or the other party *calcifies* in the new status quo. He or she zones out of conversations, ignores the other, so that eventually the two are living apart in the

¹ For much of the remainder of this *Bit to Read* I acknowledge indebtedness to Mark Driscoll, *Real Marriage*, pg 86ff.

same house, with separate social lives, separate spiritual lives, and perhaps separate bedrooms.

Each of these responses leads to a dysfunctional marriage (and family), and begins the road to potential divorce.

Solution

Husband and wife both need to realize that the problem is *sin*. One party or both has relaxed their relation with the Lord God. Instead of focusing on him, one party or both has elevated some created thing as their source of happiness. That created thing could be their own pride, or it could be the insistence that the spouse be a different person than he/she now apparently is, or it could be a focus on money or holiday or children, etc. When the eye is off of God and placed on anything other than God, we are guilty of idolatry. This sin invariably provokes the wrath of holy God, so that things by definition must get worse in our marriage. The solution is repentance.

Repentance

The Christian should know what repentance actually is. In practice, though, too many Christian husbands and wives choose one or more of the following as their definition of sin:

- Admitting to wrongdoing because they got caught, and then admitting only the stuff they got caught out on. That makes the spouse wonder: what else are you hiding?
- Denying the sin (perhaps by insisting the spouse has the facts wrong). This response makes the spouse doubt whether you can be trusted at all.
- Managing our sin better so as to maintain appearances – be it to the spouse, be it to the wider family or even the community. The spouse continues to realize that something is amiss. This leads to some version of the calcification mentioned above.
- Acknowledging the wrong, but then laying the blame on another. The spouse cannot respect such a person.
- Showing worldly sorrow, that is, feeling bad for the wrong committed, but not before God. This response neglects that the crucial element of a happy Christian marriage is the vertical relation with the Lord.
- Giving a confession of wrong, saying sorry, and then expecting the other to move on. This minimizes the hurt done to the spouse.

None of these reflects the Lord's definition of repentance. Christ on the cross cried out his gut-rending anguish, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" (Mt 27:46). That question has painful answer: *my sin* prompted God to forsake Jesus – for eternal divine rejection is the penalty I deserve. Since Christ suffered what I deserve, shall I belittle sin or continue in sin? God forbid! That in turn is why he who is the apex in the triangle of marriage told the husbands and wives of the congregation in Colossae (and the rest of the membership too) to "put to death what is earthly in you" (Col 3:5). *Kill* the sin in your hearts – it's radical language!

But it's not new language. Paul's command echoes Jesus' instruction to pluck out the eye that causes you to sin and to chop off the offensive hand (Mt 5:27-30), and recalls too Jesus' words that those who would follow him need to take up their cross (Mt 10:38) – that unmistakable symbol of death. The command to "put to death what is earthly in you" is not demanding too much, for Christ has died and arisen from the dead – and the Christian has died with Christ (Col 2:20; 3:2) and arisen with him too (3:1). The Christian spouse may then tackle his repentance with confidence and optimism; Sin, that monster within, is not my master but Christ is, and so I can be deliberate in daily plucking out the eye that wants to see what amounts to adultery and daily cutting off the hand that itches to touch what it

shouldn't touch or move the mouse to travel where I may not travel. Killing the earthly involves the adamant *refusal* to commit the offence again, and involves that you take every measure available to you in this broken world to assure the spouse that you will not fall again on this point. This needs total openness in communication, sharing with your spouse what you actually feel and think, be it about matters of work, matters of self, matters of the family, etc. This needs also fervent prayer for strength and courage to kill the desires insides. This repentance knows no place for half measures. Repairing the horizontal relation between husband and wife goes hand in hand with repairing the vertical relation with God.

Forgiveness

The Lord God, primary partner in a sinner's marriage, is known for his forgiveness (Ex 34:6-9; Ps 130:4). This God sent his only Son into this broken world to deliver sinners from bondage to sin and Satan, and reconcile them to God. This Son was not sent for the decent and the deserving, but for the unworthy. "Christ died for the *ungodly*," Paul writes; "while we were still *sinners*, Christ died for us"; in fact, "while we were *enemies* we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (Rom 5:6,8,10). If God forgave me while I did not deserve it, shall I withhold forgiveness till my spouse deserves it?! Forgiving a fellow sinner is an act of worship before God! That is why Paul is adamant: "as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive" (Col 3:13; see also Mt 6:12,14,15).

But what is forgiveness? In our marriages so many misconceptions exist:

- Forgiveness is not denying that you were sinned against, or diminishing the sin committed against you. That's so easily done when we say, "Ah, it was no big deal, I've moved on." Both repentance and forgiveness requires that we describe the sin for what it really was. That includes describing the pain the spouse's transgression caused.
- Forgiveness is not tolerating more of the same sin. That's enabling sin, and enabling sin is itself a sin that requires repentance.
- Forgiveness is not waiting for someone to acknowledge sin, apologize for it and repent – and only then forgive. Some people may never repent, or never repent to the degree we would desire. Remember: forgiveness is act of worship we do before *God* first of all, not people. Besides, the hard reality is that the deeper I'm hurt, the higher I'll set the bar for what the other's repentance needs to look like. Then forgiveness ends up depending on a human standard.
- Forgiveness is not forgetting what happened to us. Erasing deeply felt sin from our minds is in fact impossible to expect. Even God does not forget, for he develops no memory lapse (see Mt 12:36). Instead, he graciously chooses not to deal with sinners according to the measure he knows we deserve.
- Forgiveness is not that we promise never to feel the pain of the sin again. It is instead that we make the decision by God's grace not to be paralyzed again by what happened, or defined by it.
- Forgiveness is not a one-time event. As the memories recur, one may need to forgive again, and again. The spouse needs to realize this, and make the repeated forgiving easy.
- Forgiveness is not neglecting place for justice. God has given the authorities to avenge the wrongdoer and to protect the citizenry (Romans 13:1-7).

Forgiveness is instead extending to the spouse, unconditionally, the same love the Lord God has shown to us when he gave his Son to atone for our sins. The Christian does not forgive his spouse because she is so good or so deserving, but because *God* is so good and so deserving. Forgiveness is an act of worship before God. Then it's clear too: letting

bitterness grow in our hearts on account of the wrong done to us is itself a sin which requires repentance.

Sum

Christian marriage is three. In marriage one's identity is not determined first of all by ones spouse, but by our relation with the Lord God. Because of what he gave us in Jesus Christ, we have all we need for a life of service to him – also with a sinful spouse.

C Bouwman
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