

# Relationships

What is a relationship?

How do we establish a relationship and keep it going?

What is a legitimate relationship?

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(This was a letter to someone many years ago. The names have been taken out.)

Thank you for coming to see me. I really enjoyed getting to know you. I came from a very poor Southern home, where we did not have air conditioning or a car until I was a senior in high school. My grandfather, with whom I lived until I was 11 along with my mother and grandmother, was an alcoholic. My dad died from cirrhosis of the liver, having drunk himself to death. (I hardly knew him as my parents divorced when I was two years old.) My wife is also from a divorced background. The minister who married Ruth and me said that the statistics were against us since both our parents had been through divorces, but that the grace of God would make the difference. Sometimes I give people this riddle: I have been married twice, never divorced, my first wife did not die, and I'm not a bigamist. The answer is that on our 25th wedding anniversary, we publicly renewed our vows and then took a cruise. Our son was the best man, and our daughter the maid of honor. I said all that to say this: the reason we have beaten the odds is not because we are better than others — indeed, we are not — but solely the grace of God. Let me briefly explain.

The basis for all human relationships is a vital relationship with Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The hope we have for any change is bound up in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I do not mean by that just church attendance, though that is certainly very important. The institutional Church has been a failure the last 100 years, though the fault lies not with the Church *per se* but with the lack of the old Gospel that has been taught the last century. Since ministers tend not to take Him and His Word seriously, neither do the people. They think that they can come and go as they please and certainly do not have any accountability to God through His Church, which is patently false. The Reformed Episcopal Church is seeking to change that in her churches.

The main point of this letter is to emphasize how the Gospel applies to human relationships, ***that our relationship with Him necessarily determines our human relationships***. A marriage is *defined* in Scripture as one male and one female committing themselves to one another for life by

**“He must reign until all His enemies are His footstool” (1 Corinthians 15:25)**

vows in the presence of the appropriate witnesses. The witnesses must include a representation of God (minister) and of man (parents in the case of a first marriage and/or other witnesses). This relationship between the man and the woman is **based on** their commitment to God, is **sustained** by using the means of grace in the context of the Church, the **terms** are God's Word, especially the Ten Commandments, the **goal** is producing holiness in the lives, and its **fruit** is to continue the covenant through godly children. I shall briefly explain each of these.

The definition of marriage I have given is pretty much standard theology, and could be proven from various passages of Scripture. Another way to say the same thing is that **marriage is a covenant**, an agreement between the two heterosexual parties in which they commit themselves to one another for life. This is not the modern practice of "consenting adults," but is really the opposite. In my opinion, it is this point that has reaped much havoc in the lives of many, for they have either not understood or did not care what constitutes a relationship. The biblical view of marriage is not an experiment to see if the parties can get along nor a test of compatibility. At this point, our relationship with God is foremost and determinative. When one comes to God for forgiveness of sins, he comes just as he is, sins and all. Indeed, the only thing we can contribute to our relationship with God is our sins; He gives the grace based on what Jesus has done. The sinner surrenders **unconditionally** to Jesus, asking for His grace not only to forgive his sins but also to make him/her a better person. Similarly, when two people come to be married, they come just as they are, unconditionally surrendering themselves to one another, depending of the grace of God. The reason they know it will work is that God has promised His grace.

Such a relationship is not a compatibility test. When I say that marriage is based on our spiritual marriage to Christ, consider the following contrasts between the two current models of marriage. The "consenting adults" model says, "I am first; you exist to serve me; you must make me happy and if not then we shall part ways; love is not in my control, you control my love; if you are lovely then I can love you otherwise I will leave; I want the fruit of marriage (sex, money, and sometimes children) without the commitment, etc." By contrast, God's model is specifically stated to be based on His love for His Church (Ephesians 5) and is this: "You are first; I exist to serve you; I will do all in my power to make you happy; love is in my control and I am always responsible to give it because it is not drawn passively out of me; you do not have to perform for me to love you, etc."

If I may make an observation, women are very sensitive to commitment. They tend rightly and innately **to define love as commitment**, and this in turn gives them tremendous security (Ephesians 5). Security has little to do with finances. Without this they feel unloved, something to be used for a

while and then discarded, regardless of a man's words to the contrary. This is one reason why the "consenting adults" model does not work, namely, the commitment is reserved for later, if she is worthy.

When we came to Christ for forgiveness of sins, we came unconditionally. He loved us not because we are lovely or because His love was drawn out of Him by some irresistible force. He loves because He chose to love us by vow in the covenant of grace. In the world's model, love is an emotion that someone else elicits from us; we are passive and "fall in and out of love" according to how the other person treats us. (No wonder this needs to be tested to see if it works, and it rarely does!) The biblical model says that by the grace of God *I will* love you, and we *will* make this relationship work. That true love need not be tested to see if it is compatible is further seen by the fact that we have no choice in our parents or siblings, and yet we make these relationships work. How much more should we make a relationship work in which we have a choice! The former believes that the other person is in control of his responses while the latter says that we are in control of our love. Indeed, we are so much in control of our love that we can even love our enemies, as the Lord instructed us.

Therefore, for one to say I have to leave this relationship because I'm not happy anymore is to engage in selfishness, to give an excuse for a lack of commitment and for not wanting responsibility. It is a total misunderstanding of the nature of love. Marriage is a commitment whereby the vowing partners voluntarily limit their freedom for the benefits they will receive and for the glory of God. They are not "wedded" to the idea that freedom means no responsibility but that true freedom is enslavement. Just as freedom from our sins comes from enslavement to the Lord by an unconditional surrender to Him, so true freedom in marriage derives from enslavement to our partner, only doing good for him/her. A commitment easily made is easily broken, but one done according to God's Word and through public vows is to be taken seriously.

Let us now consider that marriage is *sustained* by using the means of grace in the context of the Church, and that the *terms* are God's Word, especially the Ten Commandments. The means of grace include attending worship together at the same Church, praying together, reading the Bible together, making frequent use of the sacraments, and especially subjecting ourselves to the authority of God in the institution of His Church. In America, we like to pretend that we are autonomous individuals, "masters of our own fates and captains of our own souls," as Henly rebelliously put it. If God agreed with us, He would not have given us so many restraints in His various covenants, such as family, Church, employment, and government. The robust individualism that has characterized so much of the USA is rebellion against God. As Robert Bork has so eloquently stated in his piercing

book, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*, modern radical individualism (and egalitarianism) is destroying what used to be a Christian culture. Thus when I say “in the context of the Church,” I mean that we consciously submit to the authority of God’s Church, knowing that such submission is really submission to Him.

The **terms** of all covenants, whether by atheists or by Christians, are the Ten Commandments. Indeed, since this is God’s world and He created it, the only moral law that exists is His. Any “law” enacted by man, whether the Congress or the Vestry of a church, is either an application of God’s law or an act of rebellion. Satan told Eve in the Garden that if she ate the fruit (we do not know what kind of fruit it was) that she would be like God “knowing good and evil.” The Hebrew word for “knowing” (remember, I teach Hebrew in seminary) in this passage means “determining.” In other words, the lie of the ages has been that man is “free” to determine his own so-called “values.” (“Values” really do not exist. God has sovereignly imposed His commandments on the world, not His Ten Suggestions.) Man is allegedly free to make up his own moral code as he pleases, thus being a law-giver and like God.

In light of all this, the terms for any covenant, whether the government, an employer, a church, or especially marriage, is God’s holy Law.<sup>1</sup> As the Apostle Paul stated by the Holy Spirit,

Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not bear false witness,” “You shall not covet,” and if *there is* any other commandment, are *all* summed up in this saying, namely, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love *is* the fulfillment of the law (Romans 13:8-10).

Here we have a definition of what love is. It is basically **volitional** (thus we control it), being obedient to God’s Law regarding others. If one loves his wife according to these commands, she will not normally leave him. In other words, he does not commit adultery but gives himself to her alone; he does not steal but provides for her; he does not tell others about their problems who are not part of the proper covenants (especially he does not tell all his “friends”); he does not torture his soul with covetousness; and he does for others what he would want them to do for him (within the limits of how Scripture defines that). The other commandments from the Ten are implied. Such is love. Another way to define love is that it gives itself for the other, self-sacrificially, unconditionally, continually, overlooking his/her faults, seek-

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<sup>1</sup> Russia thought she could determine her own ethic and found out differently.

ing only to do good. This necessarily involves an enormous time commitment, without which it is not possible to love biblically at all.

The **goal** of marriage is holiness of life, which means being ever more conformed to the moral character of Christ. This is a slow and painful process, but the godly husband seeks such in his wife and children. The only way to obtain this is by using the means of grace mentioned above.

Finally, the **fruit** of marriage is having sexual union that produces children. This is an enormous responsibility. One of the worst sins of our culture<sup>2</sup> is the irresponsible attitudes towards sex and then nullifying the product of such a union by abortion. The parties want the fruit of the union without the permanent commitment and especially without the responsibility. This is irresponsibility with a vengeance. But while the non-Christians are killing their children through abortion, “values,” humanistic education, and so forth, Christians are encouraged to have lots of kids to promote the kingdom of God and for the glory of God. If things continue like this for some time, Christians will populate the world while the others will have no prodigy to continue their rebellion!

Ruth and I were married on 25 July 1969. Divorce is not in our vocabulary. The first time Ruth and I had sex was on our wedding night. What sustains us is not some mystical “magic” or “spark” or “chemistry,” all of which are not definable, but our commitment to God, to His Word, to our vows, to using the means of grace in the context of the Church, and to obedience to God’s terms of the marriage covenant, the Ten Commandments. Yes, the “spark” is there, but it is the caboose and not the engine. The engine is the commitment.

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<sup>2</sup> The worst sin is apathy by Christians. If it were not for this, we would not have abortion.