

Marriage is God's answer for our deepest human need —companionship. But how can couples build oneness from the beginning? In this book, relationship expert Gary Chapman covers hot topics like meaningful communication, expectations, and money management. Questions at the end of each chapter encourage interaction between husbands and wives.

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CHAPTER ONE

Why Do People Marry?

BEFORE WE LAUNCH into a discussion of *how* to make a marriage work, perhaps we ought to pause long enough to ask, “What is the purpose of marriage?” What are we trying to accomplish in marriage?

If you asked a dozen friends and family members those two questions and instructed them to write their answers privately, how many different answers do you think you would receive? Here are some of the responses I’ve received from both singles and marrieds:

- Sex
- Companionship
- Love
- To provide a home for children
- Social acceptance

- Economic advantage
- Security

All of these are important, but in a time when a substantial segment of the population is single, simply being married no longer guarantees social acceptance. Not everyone chooses to (or is able to) have children. Premarital sex is common. Love and companionship, yes—but family and friends can help provide those things.

Then why marriage?

To fully respond to these questions, we need to look through the eyes of faith, seeking God's wisdom. And in the Bible, we see a much different picture. Beginning with Genesis, the first book of the Bible, where we read the creation story, we find that God's idea of marriage is the blending of a husband and wife in the deepest possible way into a new unit that will both satisfy the individuals involved and serve the purposes of God in the highest possible manner.

COMPANIONSHIP AND COMMITMENT

The heart of humankind cries out for companionship. We are social creatures. God Himself said of Adam, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18). I would remind you that this analysis was before the fall of humanity and that this man already had the warm, personal fellowship of God. Yet God said, "That is not enough!"

God's answer to man's need was to create woman (Gen. 2:18, 24). The Hebrew word used here is one that literally means "face-to-face." That is, God created one with whom the man could have a face-to-face relationship. It speaks of that kind of in-depth personal relationship whereby the two are united in an unbreakable union that satisfies

the deepest longings of the human heart. Marriage was God's answer for humankind's deepest human need—union of life with another.

This unity is to encompass all of life. It is not simply a physical relationship. Nor is it simply the giving and receiving of emotional support. It is rather the total union of husband and wife on the intellectual, social, spiritual, emotional, and physical levels.

This kind of union cannot come without the deep and enduring *commitment* that God intends to accompany marriage. Marriage is not a contract to make sexual relationships acceptable. It is not merely a social institution to provide for the care of children. It is more than a psychological clinic where we gain the emotional support we need. It is more than a means for gaining social status or economic security. The ultimate purpose of marriage is not even achieved when it is a vehicle for love and companionship, as valuable as these are.

The supreme purpose of marriage is the union of a husband and wife at the deepest possible level and in all areas, which in turn brings the greatest possible sense of fulfillment to the couple and at the same time serves best the purposes of God for their lives.

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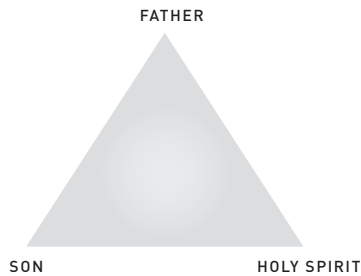
WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE "ONE"?

Obviously, simply getting married does not guarantee unity. There is a difference between "being united" and "unity." As the old coun-

try preacher used to say, “When you tie the tails of two cats together and hang them across the fence, you have united them, but then unity is a different matter.”

Perhaps the best biblical example that we have of this kind of unity is God Himself. It is interesting that the word used for “one” in Genesis 2:24, where God says, “This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into *one*” (italics added), is the same Hebrew word used of God Himself in Deuteronomy 6:4 where we read, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is *one*” (NIV, italics added).

The word “one” speaks of composite unity as opposed to absolute unity. The Scriptures reveal God to be Father, Son, and Spirit, yet one. We do not have three Gods but one God, triune in nature. Illustrations of the Trinity are many, and all break down at some point, but let me use a very common one to illustrate some of the implications of this unity.

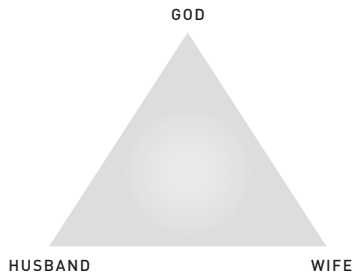


The triangle may be placed on any side, and the *Father*, *Son*, and *Spirit* labels may be moved to any position. It makes no difference, for God is one. What we cannot do is erase one side or remove one title. It must all stand together. God is triune, and God is one. We cannot fully understand this statement, yet we must speak of God in this manner because this is the manner in which He has revealed

Himself. We would not know that God is triune unless God had revealed Himself as triune. We would not know that the Trinity is a unity except that God has revealed it as such.

God is *unity*. On the other hand, God is *diversity*. We cannot rightly say that there are no distinctions among the Trinity. Strictly speaking, the Holy Spirit did not die for us upon the cross. That was the work of the Son. As believers, we are not indwelt by the Father but by the Spirit. The members of the Trinity do have varying roles, yet unity. It is unthinkable that members of the Trinity would ever operate as separate entities. From Genesis 1:26 where God said, “Let *us* make human beings in *our* image” (italics added) to Revelation 22:16–21, we find the Trinity working together as a composite unity.

What implications does this divine unity have for marriage? Here is a second triangle:



This time the triangle may not be tilted to rest on another side. God must remain at the apex of a Christian marriage. We can, however, exchange the labels *husband* and *wife*, for they are to be one.

In our individualistic age, “unity” is not a prized concept. Yet marital unity is not the kind of unity that blots out personality. Rather, it is the kind of unity that frees you to express your own diversity, yet experience complete oneness with your mate. You are

free to be all that God intends you to be while experiencing all that God intended when He united us in marriage. No truth could be more liberating and satisfying.

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IN CLOSING

Whether you are just beginning your new life as husband and wife or are marital veterans working your way through some challenges, I hope that you have clearly in mind the goal of marriage—unity on the deepest possible level in all areas of life. Maybe that is only a dream for you, but if you are willing to work at it, it can become reality. Can you imagine what

it would be like to have a degree of intellectual oneness? Social oneness? Spiritual oneness? Physical oneness? Do not give up. You may be on the brink of a new discovery.

“But my spouse is not interested in working with me,” you say. “I can’t do it all by myself.” True, but you can do *something* by yourself. And that something just may be used of God to stimulate change in your mate. I believe that the principle discussed in the following chapter is the number one principle for marital happiness and good health. Read carefully, think clearly, and do not forget the assignment at the end of each chapter.



YOUR TURN

1. What would be your answer to the question, “What is the purpose of marriage?”
2. Do you feel that striving toward unity in your relationship has taken away your individuality? If so, would you be willing to discuss this with your spouse?
3. What do you think “union at the deepest possible level” in a marriage looks like in practice? Can you think of examples in your marriage?



CHAPTER TWO

“Why Won’t They Change?”

HEATHER WAS SMILING when she came into my office. But as we were settling in and I asked her, “And what is on your mind today?” the smile departed, and she started crying.

“I don’t know,” she said. “There are so many things. Sometimes I feel overwhelmed. It’s my marriage. Tyler and I can’t seem to understand each other. We spend a lot of time arguing. Some days I feel like giving up.”

“What are the issues over which you argue?” I asked.

“Lots of things,” she said. “I just don’t feel that Tyler is willing to meet me halfway. He doesn’t help with the baby much and does almost nothing around the house. He says that his new job takes all of his energy, but I’m tired too. On Saturday, he says he needs to recuperate from the week. Well, maybe I’d like to relax too, but I can’t. Somebody has to take care of things. If he would help me,

then maybe we both could have some free time.”

Two weeks later, I was able to talk with Tyler. I asked the question, “How would you describe the problems in your relationship with Heather?”

“She’s so demanding,” he said. “I can’t ever do enough for her. If I go buy groceries, she complains because I forgot the baby shampoo. All she does is complain, so I’ve almost quit trying.”

“Besides all of that,” he said, “we have almost no intimacy.”

“You mean sex?” I inquired.

“Yes,” he said. “Since Emma was born it’s gone way down. I don’t think that’s what marriage ought to be, but I can’t seem to get her to understand that.”

Heather and Tyler have serious problems in their relationship. But each describes the problem in terms of their mate’s behavior. They each believe that if the other would change, they could have a good marriage.

The two are essentially saying the same thing. “My problem is my husband/wife. I am basically a nice person, but my partner has made me miserable.”

The pattern is always the same. We pour out our feelings against our mates, describing our problems in terms of our mate’s failures.

When I counsel couples, I often give them paper and pencil and ask them to write for me the things they dislike about their partner. You should see the lists. Some have to request additional paper. They write furiously and freely. Then, a bit later, I ask that they list for me what they feel to be their own weaknesses. Their response is amusing. Usually they can think of one weakness right away, so they write that one down. Then they have to really think to come up with that second one. Some never find it. Is that not amazing? Only one

little thing wrong with me (or at most three or four), but my mate has dozens of failures.

FINDING FAULT—IN YOURSELF

If my spouse would just get straightened out, we could have a happy marriage, we reason. So we nag, we fuss, we demand, we cry, we withdraw, we despair—all to no avail.

My spouse does not change, and therefore I am destined to misery. Do not believe it! *Your marriage can improve and improvement can begin today, regardless of your partner's attitude.*

There is a strategy for improvement, spoken by Jesus and recorded in Matthew 7:1–5. In the following quotation, I am substituting “partner” for the word “friend” so that we may see the principle at work in marriage.

Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged.

And why worry about a speck in your partner's eye when you have a log in your own? How can you think of saying to your partner, “Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,” when you can't see past the log in your own eye? Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your partner's eye.

Now, please do not misunderstand. I am not calling anyone a hypocrite. I am simply quoting a principle taught by Jesus. Jesus is saying that if one tries to improve her marriage by getting her

husband to change (working hard to get the speck out of his eye), energies are being expended in the wrong direction. The place to begin is with one's own failures (the plank or beam in one's own eye).

I am not suggesting that the partner does not have weaknesses or faults. What I am saying is that trying to deal with the faults of the partner is not the place to begin. The first question for any of us when we are in a marital storm is, "What's wrong with *me*? What are my faults?"

This approach may seem strange to you, for after all, your partner is 95 percent of the problem. Right? You are not perfect, but your failure is only minimal. Certainly not more than 5 percent. Let us assume that this is true, though the percentages may change as you begin reflection. Even if you are only 5 percent of the problem, the key to improvement lies with you. Jesus said, "First get rid of the log in your own eye."

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What are the mechanics for doing this? How do you go about extracting a "log" from your eye? I suggest that you get alone with God, preferably in a place where you can talk aloud. (If you really feel strong hostility toward your mate, you may want to make a written list of his or her faults beforehand. This may help free the mind psychologically, so that you can deal with your own failures.)

MAKING A LIST

Now, alone with God, simply ask, "Lord, what's wrong with *me*? What are my faults? What are my sins? I know that my mate has many, and I have already written those down, but right now what I want to know is: What are my sins?" Get your pencil and paper (or tablet) ready, for that is a prayer God will answer. Make a list of your sins.

You may find the sin of bitterness, which is condemned in Ephesians 4:31: "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior." Certainly your partner may have triggered your negative attitude, but you are the one who allowed bitterness to develop. It is always wrong to be bitter toward one of God's creatures.

You may find the sin of unkindness, which is in violation of the command of Ephesians 4:32: "Be kind to each another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you."

"But my mate has not done anything to deserve my kindness!" you protest. True, but *you* are the one who decides to be kind or unkind. Absence of kindness is always wrong for the Christian.

You may discover lack of love toward your mate. We will discuss this further in chapter 3, but let me say here that love as described in 1 Corinthians 13 is an act or attitude more than an emotion. "Love is patient and kind . . . not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged" (vv. 4–5). When you fail to express love to your partner, you have sinned.

The Holy Spirit may bring many sins to your mind. Write them

down one by one until you can think of no other, then open your Bible and read 1 John 1:9 (NIV): “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” In making your list, you have really confessed your sin, for you have agreed with God that these things are wrong in your life.

ACCEPTING GOD'S FORGIVENESS

I suggest, however, that you go back over the list and agree again with God that these are wrong and, at the same time, thank Him for Christ's death on the cross and therefore for forgiveness. In your own words you are saying, “Father, this is wrong—so wrong. How could I be so foolish? But I want to thank You for the cross—that Christ has paid for this sin, and I can be forgiven. Thank You, Father, for forgiveness.”

Work through your list and accept God's forgiveness for every past failure. God does not intend us to live under the emotional load of past failures. We can be forgiven.

A CLEAR CONSCIENCE

After the acceptance of God's forgiveness, there is a second step toward a growing, God-honoring marriage. The apostle Paul states it in Acts 24:16 as a basic principle in his own life: “I always try to maintain a clear conscience before God and all people.”

I believe that, in this statement, we have the most important principle of mental health and, consequently, of marital health. Paul is not saying that he never did anything wrong, but rather that, having done wrong, he has also cleared his conscience, first toward God and

then toward people. We empty our conscience toward God when we confess our sins. We empty our conscience toward a spouse when we go to him or her and confess our failures.

"But what if my spouse isn't willing to forgive me?" That is their problem and not yours. Your responsibility is to admit the wrong you carry and ask forgiveness. Your mate's response is not your responsibility. You have done what you can do by dealing with your wrong. You have not done what you can do until you have dealt with your own offenses. You see, you cannot confess your partner's sin, but you can deal with your 5 percent.

You can say to him or her in your own words, after a good meal, "Honey (or whatever title you prefer), God has dealt with me today, and I now realize that I have been wrong in so many things. I have confessed them to God and want to ask your forgiveness. I have been very selfish in demanding that you _____. I have not been very kind in _____. I have failed in meeting your needs for _____. And I want to ask, will you forgive me?" Be as specific with your mate as you have been with God. Give him or her a chance to respond.

What will happen when you do this? It may be the dawning of a new day. On the other hand, your spouse may say, "Oh yeah, I've heard that before, and I don't believe it." What you do at this point will determine whether you must have another confession session with God, or whether you will go on to improve your marriage. If you explode with tears, words, or flying saucers, you will need to retreat to ask God's forgiveness for another failure.

Why not respond by saying, "I can understand your feelings. I know that I have confessed before, and I know that I have failed many times to be what I want to be. So I understand that you find it hard to believe that things will be any different this time."

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