

# Contents

Introduction

Causes of Conflict

Principles for Resolving Conflict

Keeping the Peace

Notes

## Coming to Grips with **MARITAL CONFLICT**

**H**e's so oppressive sometimes I think I'm in a concentration camp, and yet he expects to have sex with me! It's like a guard at Auschwitz wanting to have sex with a woman prisoner and expecting her to enjoy it!"

With all of her might this woman tried to be the good Christian wife she was taught to be. For years she lived with a demanding, hot-tempered husband, trusting God to change him. But her submission seemed to have little effect on his attitude and actions. Her question was one that many married partners ask: When is enough, enough?

Although the male species at times may seem to be the most difficult to live with, many women make impossible demands on their husbands, thereby blocking all possible avenues to harmony and mutual respect. "Everything I do is wrong," a

man told me. "I receive no affirmation, she is constantly undermining my authority, and hates sex. Some day I would like to catch her in a good mood!"

No one plans to have an unhappy marriage. Yet marital conflict exists everywhere. Even those who appear to have a fulfilling marriage often live with anger, mistrust, and disharmony. Many wives say they have no one to talk to, they are neglected, and despair of finding help even after years of struggle. Husbands in turn complain that they are weary of being nagged, weary of being compared to Robert Redford, and exasperated when their wives accuse them of being sexual animals.

We would be startled if we knew the amount of verbal and even physical abuse that goes on in homes. Yes, even Christian homes. When the curtains are drawn, only God knows what happens behind the closed doors. And for the most part, it's not a pretty picture. If marriage is to mirror the relationship between Christ and the Church then many (most?) marriages are a tragic failure. Surely God intended something better.

Marital conflict is as old as the human race. But our "fallenness" is having a greater impact on this generation. Look no farther than your

daily newspaper and you will see the symptoms of marital discord.

### CAUSES OF CONFLICT

Why all this conflict? Five factors contribute to discord in marriage: the fractured family, unrealistic expectations, sexual immorality, an inadequate understanding of conflict, and the belief that change is impossible.

#### THE FRACTURED FAMILY

Ever since Cain killed Abel, broken homes have existed, with abuse and hatred spilling into the lives of the children. But thirty years ago here in the United States, this breakdown began to permeate all areas of society—rich and poor, black and white, educated and uneducated. Divorce, which always carried the stigma of failure, now is a popular and sophisticated escape from an unhappy marriage. The social restraints that encouraged people to work out their problems have disappeared.

Children caught in the midst of rejection and power plays have grown up without the warm and secure relationships they crave. They have lacked role models and have been unable to cope with the hostility they have felt toward a father, a mother, or both.

With the proliferation of pornography, sexual molestation and abuse have escalated. We are told that one in four girls will be sexually abused by a father, a relative, or a trusted neighbor.<sup>1</sup> Sexual aberrations of various kinds are common.

Unless these emotional wounds are resolved, rejected children enter marriage with a huge bundle of emotional deficiencies and oppressive feelings—feelings bound to spill over into the most intimate of all relationships. Those who have their roots in a dysfunctional family often are unable to give or receive love. Far from curing such deficiencies, marriage actually brings such problems to light.

I'm not suggesting that those who have had a deprived childhood have no chance for marital harmony, but they may have to work harder to achieve fulfillment in their marriage relationship. Thankfully, God helps people minimize, if not totally negate, the power of a destructive past.

#### UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Incredibly, some people actually expect marriage to make them happy! Of course, marriage does bring happiness, but only to those who have already found meaning in their personal relationship with God. In

other words, those who are unhappy single will likely be unhappy married.

Some women think that God created their husbands for the sole purpose of making them (the wives) happy. When this doesn't happen, they chip away at their husbands, trying to shape the kind of person who makes them happy. Unfortunately, their best efforts often backfire, and the door to progress slams shut.

I've known engaged couples who were clearly mismatched, but thought that after marriage their problems would vanish. Too late they discovered that their differences were increased tenfold. Like a magnifying glass, marriage took manageable irritations and enlarged them.

As a path to happiness marriage is overrated. Two imperfect people cannot come together without mutual disappointments and struggles. If this is so for those who are emotionally well-adjusted, think of the implications for the young man or woman who marries simply to get away from home, or for a couple with only marginal emotional and spiritual stability. "If love is blind," someone observed, "marriage is an eye opener!" Those who think marriage is a shortcut to happiness will wish they had taken the main road.

Marriage cannot do what only God can; that is, bring inner content-

ment. Marriage is at best two imperfect people, united in body, soul, and spirit in a growing relationship that is to reflect the unity of the Godhead. Every marriage has its stresses, which can be used either to unite the couple or to divide them.

#### SEXUAL IMMORALITY

Moral impurity sows seeds that eventually can bear bitter fruit. Many couples who do not know how to neutralize the detrimental effects of premarital sex significantly reduce their chances for a happy marriage. Some couples say that they enjoyed sex before marriage, but their relationship went sour immediately after saying "I do." Before marriage they could enjoy sex without resolving deeper issues in their relationship. Real matters of communication and honest differences were buried under artificial intimacy. Marriage forced them to deal with these pressure points. Add to this the mistrust that developed because of their past relationship, and all the ingredients for conflict are present.

Of course there is cleansing and forgiveness for past sexual relationships. But unless the past has been fully faced in the presence of God, a couple that has had premarital relationships will be living with unfinished business.