

PREPARING FOR
CHRISTIAN
MARRIAGE

By
John McFadden
and
David McCarthy

Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 West 8th Avenue, Eugene OR 97401

Preparing for Christian Marriage

By John McFadden and David McCarthy

Copyright©2002 by The Ekklesia Project

*Printed by Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 W. 8th Avenue, Eugene OR 97401*

All Rights Reserved.

*To become involved in The Ekklesia Project,
or for more information, please contact:*

Professor Michael L. Budde
The Ekklesia Project
c/o Department of Political Science
DePaul University
990 W. Fullerton Parkway
Chicago, IL 60614
mail@ekkleksiaproject.org
(773) 325-1974

The Ekklesia Project maintains a web page that includes resources, announcements and news regarding our activities and work. You may find it at <http://www.ekkleksiaproject.org>

Pamphlets already published include

1. *The Ekklesia Project: A School for Subversive Friendships*
by Stanley Hauerwas and Michael Budde
2. *Preparing for Christian Marriage*
by David McCarthy and John McFadden
3. *Paganism and the Professions*
by Robert Brimlow
4. *God's Beautiful City: Christian Mission After Christendom*
by Stephen Fowl
5. *Church Membership: An Introduction to the Journey*
by David McCarthy and John McFadden
6. *Authority, Freedom and the Dreams that We Are Made of*
by Dale Rosenberger
7. *Missional Evangelism* by Inagrace Dietterich and Lacey Warner

Couples who marry today have more choices and options than ever before in selecting the setting in which their ceremony will occur and who will officiate at that ceremony. People can -- and do -- exchange vows in malls, amusement parks, and while leaping from airplanes. Legal weddings are conducted by judges, justices of the peace, and Elvis impersonators. You have chosen to have a member of the Christian clergy officiate at your ceremony, and to exchange your vows in the context of a worship service of the Christian church. Congratulations! This choice can lead not only to a joyous wedding ceremony where you are surrounded by the blessings of God and a gathered community of faith, but to a loving, committed marriage which grows deeper and stronger each year, blessing and enriching the world about you.

Even as there are both secular and sacred settings for wedding ceremonies, there are secular and sacred understandings of the institution of marriage. This booklet is designed to explain how the Christian church understands the meaning and purpose of marriage, and also to suggest specific practices within Christian marriage that can keep your relationship healthy and growing. It is our hope that you will read and discuss this booklet first with one another, and then with the clergy person who will officiate at your ceremony.

1. The Meaning and Purpose of Marriage

Marriage is held in high regard in almost every quarter of society. Popular songs, television programs, and films portray marriage as the ideal fulfillment of true love between two persons. But while both the secular culture and the church value marriage, they do so for different reasons.

Secular Culture's Focus on Romance

Moonlight and roses; hearts and flowers. A young couple romping through the surf on a lonely beach, holding hands. A slightly older couple, cheering exultantly as little Jenny scores her first goal, or smiling ruefully as Tommy tracks his muddy feet across the recently cleaned kitchen floor. A couple advanced in years, still holding hands as they assist one another to the front-porch swing of a charming farmhouse. Such are the images of healthy marriage regularly featured in the media, particularly in advertising.

Contrast these with the images of single persons that figure so prominently in commercials for soft drinks, beer, and snack foods, often centered in a 'good friends, good times!' theme. Always single people are shown in groups, sharing laughter and adventure with a community of other persons. Their community is based in leisure activities and indulgent pleasures. The message given is that when a couple marry they 'graduate' from a community they no longer need, because the love they share is sufficient unto itself; their new "community" will be made up of one

another and, later, their children. The marriage itself will be the source of their joy, their fulfillment, their happiness from now on; their new life together will be an endless string of walks on moonlit beaches. The hidden message, of course, is that should the marriage not produce such blissfully romantic experiences on a routine basis, one is with the wrong partner. After all, if marriage is a private matter centered only in personal fulfillment, it is perfectly reasonable to end the marriage if a time comes when it does not feel particularly fulfilling, or when home life, in contrast to the frolicking of beer commercials, requires common work.

When we understand marriage only in reference to private pleasures and personal fulfillment, we lose the ability to understand how marriage in community will transform us. We miss the full meaning of living in communion with others “in sickness and in health, for richer and for poorer.” We miss the profound experiences of sharing difficult times, being present to each other’s suffering, working to understand each other and to communicate better, and joining together with others in making community life ‘life-giving’. Ironically, our culture’s emphasis on personal fulfillment limits our fulfillment as whole human beings. Common cultural understandings of love and community are shallow. In their fullness, love includes steadfast endurance, commitment, and duty; community includes finding ourselves through our dependence upon others, and their dependence upon us. Jesus’ words ring true: we gain our lives when we give them away, and lose them when we attempt to keep them for ourselves.

The Church’s Focus on Marriage as a Gift to the Community

The Christian Church has long held that while the personal fulfillment of a married couple is a wonderful gift from God, it is not the primary purpose of their union. Rather, a healthy marriage is understood as enabling a husband and wife to offer deeper and richer gifts to the wider community than they could ever do individually. Marriage is not God’s intention for everyone: celibacy also has important gifts to offer community. But those who are called to marriage and who seek to discern God’s plan and purpose for their union will find they have far more to give to others than they could as single persons.

Some Christian traditions have historically emphasized bearing and raising children as the most significant gifts that marriage gives to community, and have identified child-rearing as the primary purpose of marriage. Indeed, there are still circles where couples who are capable of having children and choose not to are viewed as selfish. A more contemporary Christian perspective argues that each healthy, committed marriage benefits all children, because children desperately need to be surrounded by a stable community made up of adults who can be trusted - trusted above all to keep their promises and vows.

Our consumerist society encourages persons to pursue their own needs and desires at all costs. As a result, human relationships -- marriage, family, friendship -- are increasingly viewed as transitory and disposable. Families are now dissolved and created like corporations. When no longer useful, commitments are broken. But a clear contrast is found in the logic of Christian community, which gives a distinctive shape to Christian marriage. In community, each individual is an indispensable part of the body, with different gifts and duties. Likewise, each married couple is called to offer their special gifts to common life. Married couples are called to regard their relationship as a commitment that is more important than their own individual desires, and in doing so, husband and wife open the possibility of loving in a profound and life-giving way. Such a couple helps to make this a world fit for children to grow in, a world where children are loved and protected by adults who care more deeply about the future of the world's children than about their own gratification in the present.

Marriage in this sense is counter-cultural in a society so thoroughly steeped in individualism, for it is centered in the conviction that we have given ourselves to a relationship that is more important than our individual wants and wishes, and that we are a part of something greater than ourselves. Whether we are blessed with children of our own or not, our marriages are a gift to the world's children. Such a healthy marriage offers an alternative to a consumerist, individualist world, insofar as it puts into action the possibility of a deeper, more gracious way of life. In the way that we love, we will see the steadfast faithfulness of our forgiving God.

Marriage at its best is an expression of a divine economy in which each partner discovers that he or she is more, and can give more, than we could without the other, for marriage draws from us our hidden gifts and corrects our unhealthy tendencies. Marriage, as the deepest intimacy two human beings can share, allows us to be known by our partner in a way no other human will ever know us. Indeed, over time our partner will come to know parts of us that even we ourselves cannot see. That loving partner, wishing for us to realize our full potential in service to God, can coax forth from us the gifts and talents that otherwise would have been left undiscovered. He or she will also see, and grieve, the negative and unhealthy dimensions we carry within (and we all have our share!). As trust between partners grows, our husband or wife will be able, gently and lovingly, to challenge us to acknowledge and amend these destructive tendencies.

Obviously, this will not always be easy, and it will sometimes lead to pain and conflict; such times are not 'moonlit beach' experiences! If marriage were centered only in each person's individual gratification and personal fulfillment, we might not take such risks, which require a shared trust that each person is profoundly committed to the deeper meaning and

purpose of marriage. Marriage is where we experience the remarkable grace of discovering that the person who has seen the very worst that is within us is also the person who loves us, and believes in us the very most.

Romantic Love is not Enough

The secular, romantic understanding of marriage argues that ‘love conquers all’. Love alone will overcome differences in family backgrounds, enable us to stand unbowed in times of economic hardship, and to persevere in the face of any obstacle we might face. But this ‘you and me against the world’ model has profound limitations, particularly if the ‘love’ referred to is little more than a warm feeling of mutual attraction. Things did not turn out well for Romeo and Juliet in the end, not because they died, but because their death was so self-indulgent and self-absorbed. The Church argues that it is faith and commitment that can conquer all. When we pledge ourselves to one another for better or for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, we may not pause to consider that some, perhaps all, of these conditions will come to us in the years ahead. The promise of faith is that we will find ourselves and see God even in our trials. If our love for one another is the only resource we have with which to face these trials the marriage may well not survive. But if we share a common faith in God’s goodness, and strong bonds of mutual trust and commitment, our marriage will grow stronger and richer each year, even in the face of the inevitable adversities encountered along the way.

2. Fidelity and Permanence

Although the vows and promises exchanged within the wedding ceremony may vary in different religious communities, all include pledges of fidelity (“keep thee only onto her”) and permanence (“so long as we both shall live”). These promises lie very close to the heart of the commitment of Christian marriage.

Sexual Fidelity

Sexual fidelity within marriage is an ideal celebrated by both secular culture and the church, although for different reasons. Secular culture applauds sexual fidelity for romantic and practical reasons. Romantically, it speaks of ‘hearts that remain true’, even when separated by distance or faced with temptation, because there can be but one beloved companion and “soul-mate” for us in the entire world. To have sexual relations with another person would be to betray both one’s beloved and one’s own truest self. Understood in this way, sexual fidelity becomes the physical expression of the romantic quest for two hearts to beat as one in perfect union with one another.

But sexual fidelity rooted solely in romanticism is a fragile thing at best -- impulsive and untrustworthy. If a married person finds herself or himself strongly attracted to another person --hardly an uncommon experience -- being 'true to one's own heart' can easily become justification for entering into a sexual liaison with that person. Given both the immense power of sexual desire and the universal human need for relationships with others, making romanticism the basis for sexual fidelity carries tremendous risk of self-deception.

The secular culture also points to many practical advantages inherent in sexual fidelity. If we are faithful to our spouse, we will run no risk of contracting sexually-transmitted diseases, contributing to an unplanned pregnancy, creating public scandal, etc. But statistics suggest that persons who are fully aware of such practical, extrinsic arguments for fidelity are not less likely to refrain from adultery as a result. Indeed, such is the nature of human sin and our capacity for self-deception that we may well see such 'risk factors' accompanying adultery as nothing more than a challenge to 'do it right', that is, to do it without getting caught. If our commitment to sexual fidelity is based only upon fear of the practical consequences of unfaithfulness, it may prove just as susceptible to temptation as commitment centered in a romantic ideal.

The Church and Sexual Fidelity

The Christian Church places a high value upon sexual fidelity in marriage for two reasons. First, Holy Scripture makes it clear that remaining faithful to our spouse is God's requirement. In the Old Testament, adultery is regarded as so grave a violation of God's law that it could be punished by death. In the New Testament, while Jesus makes it clear that sexual sins, like any other, can be forgiven by God when sincerely repented, marital fidelity is again affirmed as God's expectation. As Christians, we remain faithful to our spouses for the same reason that we do not murder, steal, or bear false witness: because our spiritual lives are grounded in the sincere effort to be obedient to our God.

The Church also values sexual fidelity as one of the essential disciplines that we practice in order to forge our core identities as God's people in Christ. We remain faithful to our partner because we want to assist God in forming us into persons of integrity who can be trusted to honor our vows and promises. We are called to be a faithful, trustworthy, and steadfast people.

Like all other paths of spiritual growth, Christian marriage calls us to accept the limitations and boundaries our loving God sets for us-- limitations which paradoxically open us to possibilities for growth that are virtually without limitation. As in almost every sphere of human existence, discipline is essential for growth and progress in the life of faith. The discipline of sexual fidelity frees us from the constant distraction of

viewing other persons in our lives as potential sexual partners, enabling us to see those other persons, our spouse to whom we are deeply committed, and ourselves in richer and deeper ways.

In sexual matters, fidelity frees us to express the fullness of our lives, our worries and joys, our passions and compassion. We are freed from needing to be desirable as a sexual object, from being bound to romantic emotions, and from the ‘games’ people play in order to ‘sleep around’. Sex within Christian marriage is a shared self-giving between equals. Sexual intercourse is an expression of love that we owe each other “for better or for worse.” In the life-long context of marriage, sex will be comforting and healing at times; sometimes boring and other times extraordinary; sometimes romantic, sometimes not. The freedom of sexual expression in marriage is that we need not ‘perform’ for our partner. The sexual relationship is not carried by sexual passion; on the contrary, passion is carried by mutual respect and self-giving love.

Other Forms of Fidelity

In Christian thought, the deepest form of relationship is called a covenant. God established the first covenant between God and humankind through Abraham and Sarah, calling them to trust and obey. God promised in return not only the blessings of many descendants and a land of their own, but also that God would always be there to love, guide, and care for them. The covenant, in other words, called for fidelity from both God and God’s chosen people. Christians believe that God formed a New Covenant in Christ, one that no longer requires humanity to obey a lengthy list of specific laws in order to uphold its side of the agreement. Rather, God promised through Jesus Christ that even when we fail to keep God’s laws, our sins and failures will be forgiven if we will but accept this loving gift from God. We sometimes call this the covenant of grace, for our salvation comes to us as a freely given gift from God.

A covenant is deeper and richer than a contract or agreement. Secular culture sometimes speaks of marriage as a ‘contract’, while the Church refers to it as a spiritual covenant between two persons, with God fully present as the third party in the covenant. To view marriage as a covenant is to seek to honor the presence of God that we discover in our spouse. We wish to give our love as freely and fully to our marriage partner as God gives love to us.

Sexual fidelity may be a core discipline for married Christians, but it is only an obvious expression of a deeper sense of loyalty. Many of us have experienced a married friend or relative who brags that he or she has always been ‘faithful’, yet rarely passes up the opportunity to belittle his or her spouse in public. Can this really be termed ‘fidelity’? The roots of the word ‘faith’ lie very close to those for the word ‘loyalty’; being faithful to our spouse lies in the continuous effort to be a loyal companion to that

person in any and all circumstances. We seek the growth and the happiness of our spouse as fully as we seek these things for ourselves, for we are one another's best friends and strongest advocates. In its fullest sense, fidelity is working for another's good.

True friendships are founded upon the good, not upon their usefulness or the pleasure we receive from them. We want good things for our friends and for them to live well-- to flourish in the business of life-- to be good. Friendship is not about winning or losing; it is not self-centered or self-denying. Through cooperation and common life with friends, we learn to live well together. So much domestic quarreling over topics like money, household chores, standards expected of children, relationships with relatives, etc., is predicated on seeing one's own perspective as correct and seeking to persuade our spouse to accept our position. Fidelity, when viewed as covenantal loyalty and friendship, can move us beyond such tiresome and unproductive debates as we become less invested in being 'right' as an individual, and more invested in finding practical solutions to everyday problems that honor the needs and wishes of each partner in the covenant. In marriage, we covenant to be more than we would be alone.

We will never 'understand' our spouse as we understand a mechanical device, and the calling of Christian marriage is not that of converting our partner to our own views. Our spouse is not a problem to be solved, but a wondrous mystery to be appreciated. A mystery, theologically speaking, is not an unsolved puzzle, but a reality with inexhaustible depth. A mystery, in this sense, cannot be known completely because there is always more to know and experience. Likewise, the covenant of marriage is a call to endure, so that we might see more deeply into the eyes of our spouse -- again through the fullness of life -- "in sickness and in health." Through the eyes of our spouse, we can begin to see the profound mystery of our unique being as well. Christian marriage sustains the truth that we do not make ourselves as much as we discover who we are in the good company of God and neighbor. Our calling is to be a loyal partner to our spouse in things large and small, even as we share with our spouse a profound loyalty to the marriage, which we each recognize as more valuable than our individual wishes and desires. By living out fidelity, we are schooled in the ways of love.

Permanence in Marriage

It is common knowledge that fully half of persons who marry in the United States eventually divorce. Likely you have lived through the ending of a marriage between people who are near and important to you. Indeed, so prevalent is divorce in our time that there are many people who despair of the possibility of remaining married for life. Statistics suggests that persons whose parents have divorced (particularly if that divorce was bitter, or if they saw behaviors in their parents that were disturbing) are

often skeptical about their own chances of sharing a lifelong union. Cultural commentators make various predictions concerning the future of marriage. Some claim that the institution itself is no longer suited to the realities of our time, while others foresee the typical person marrying three or four times, seeking a partner “appropriate for the varying stages of growth in the course of his or her life.” Indeed, as advances in medical science and genetic technology promise to expand life expectancy dramatically in developed nations, the promise to stay together “until death do us part” may one day hold the possibility of sharing life together for 75 or even 100 years. Is it possible for two persons to remain suited to one another for such a lengthy span of years, or will ‘serial marriage’ become the norm?

The answer, of course, depends upon one’s understanding of marriage. If it is understood individualistically -- seeking a partner to meet ‘my needs’ -- then the comments about having different partners for different stages of one’s life make sense. But this is not the Church’s understanding of marriage.

In Jesus’ time there were two popular rabbis with strong followings. They disagreed with one another about many issues, most strikingly in how they interpreted the ancient legal code concerning divorce. That code said that a man could divorce his wife (in that patriarchal culture, divorce was not an option for women at all) only if she had done “a shameful thing.” The two rabbis had radically different understandings of what constituted a shameful thing. The stricter of the two, Shamai, held that the only action a woman might take so shameful that her husband was free to divorce her was to commit adultery. Hillel, generally regarded as a more ‘liberal’ rabbi, defined shameful thing far more broadly, arguing that it was shameful for a woman to prepare a meal that her husband did not care for, and it was shameful for her to be less attractive in his eyes than was another woman! Hillel, in other words, argued that a man could divorce his wife simply because he wished to.

When Jesus was asked, “when may a man divorce his wife?” he was essentially being asked to declare himself for Shamai or for Hillel. His answer, at least as recorded by Mark, was far stricter than even Shamai’s: he said that a man could never divorce his wife for any reason. Many have attempted to interpret this strict teaching as an ‘ideal’ to strive for rather than a requirement, or to portray it as a teaching on behalf of justice for women (who, after all, were not free to divorce their husbands in any case). Jesus’ own interpretation is simpler and more straightforward: Jesus said that it is God’s intentions for a man and woman who marry to be together forever.

There will be marriages between good and faithful persons who make a sincere effort to honor their vows that still fail, and virtually every Christian denomination recognizes that the dissolution of a marriage

cannot always be avoided. Certainly in cases where abuse is present in the marriage, divorce may be the only option available. But it remains true that marriage is intended by God to be permanent, and persons of faith must do all in their power to ensure not just that their marriage lasts, but that it continues to grow.

Remember that for Christians the marriage is understood as larger and more important than the individual wishes and goals of the persons who share it. We are not free to end our marriage because ‘my needs have changed’ or ‘our lives are moving in different directions’. Rather, we are called to attune ourselves to the direction in which our marriage is growing, being constantly renewed within a relationship that is never static.

We will be called to cultivate many gifts within ourselves to succeed in this high and holy calling. Certainly the gift of attentive listening, attempting to hear not just what our spouse is saying, but to hear the dreams and fears behind the words, is critical. Likewise we will need to develop our own communications skills so that we can ‘speak the truth in love’ to our spouse. But two skills in particular need to be highlighted here.

Forgiveness

Christian community is not founded on how good people are. In this sense, common life in the church has a basis quite different than most good and respectable organizations or institutions. Friends stay together because they like each other, and civic organizations want good, productive members. People like to rally behind winners, whether sports teams or corporations. In contrast, the gospel vision of Church is a gathering of outcasts, sinners, and poor in company with the upright and well-to-do. The Church’s charter is not human goodness but God’s forgiveness. Likewise, the Christian community’s basic unifying practices are to receive forgiveness and to give it.

Because the Christian life is founded on forgiveness, Christians ought to expect disagreements and conflicts. The core of the Christian calling is to seek to live well, to face up to our failings, and to reconcile with our brothers and sisters, friends and enemies. Too often, we allow our arguments to end our relationships. We disagree, and then we either cut off conversation or slowly drift apart. The calling of Christian community is to heal our divisions and to sit at table with our enemies.

If a husband and wife expect to have a perfect marriage, their marriage will fail. If they avoid arguments and disagreements, they will grow apart. If they expect to always live in harmony, they will not see their love flourish. It has been shown that conflict does not end marriages. Marriages die at the hands of neglect, withdrawal, and contempt. Marriages are threatened not by honest disagreement but by a failure to

seek reconciliation. A marriage that endures is only possible between two persons who have learned how to forgive and how to ask for forgiveness.

We are all sinners: we do things we should not do, and we fail to do things that we should (as St. Paul expressed it). We all do things that degrade the image of God within us and hurt the people we most love. We fail God, we fail ourselves, we fail one another. There is no avoiding sin, which has but one remedy: forgiveness. Jesus taught that there can be no limit to the number of times we must forgive the one who wrongs us; there can be no such thing as ‘the last time’ or ‘the final straw’. Forgiveness is not something reserved for rare occasions; it is an essential component of daily life together.

Forgiveness is not the same thing as ignoring destructive behaviors or allowing cruel words to bounce off our backs. Such things must be confronted and amended; the commandment to forgive one another is not a requirement to be a doormat. Often the person who confronts destructive behaviors is seen as the one who is causing trouble. The one confronted might see no problems and reply, “Why can’t you just let things well enough alone? Why do you have to push us apart?” In fact, the destructive behavior or cruel words have already divided the husband and wife. The damage is already done. Avoidance only sets the division deeper.

Our calling is to help our partner see and understand the behaviors that are hurtful or destructive and to repent them. That is the easy part. The higher calling is to humbly push our pride to the side, accept correction, and ask for forgiveness. Forgiveness can be freely granted, but it is not complete unless the hurt is honored and forgiveness accepted. We may have to forgive to cleanse our own hearts, but if our spouse refuses to accept reconciliation and to change his or her ways, the relationship will not be healed. Once forgiveness is granted and accepted, the matter must be permanently closed. To forgive one’s partner, but then to remind him or her of those actions at a later date (perhaps in a moment of passionate discussion), is not to forgive at all.

Forgiveness is the essential lubricant of a healthy marriage, and learning how to give and receive it is an essential part of our own path of spiritual growth. Forgiveness requires a host of skills and virtues, including abilities to express our feelings and hurts, to articulate what we meant to do, to be honest about our ulterior motives, to see things from our spouse’s point of view, to be patient, generous, and humble, and to have the right kind of pride in living well and in being a good husband or wife. Skills of constructive criticism and healthy argument are difficult to learn, especially when our disagreements produce anger and despair. For this reason, a life of prayer and the grace of God are essential to living our forgiveness. Forgiveness without the virtues and skills of recognizing and

accepting wrongs is merely a gloss on things unsettled. Forgiveness, for this reason, is nothing if not a way of life.

Compromise

Persons who do not learn how to compromise on a broad range of issues will have great difficulty in sharing an abiding relationship. To marry is a choice that precludes certain other choices in our individual lives. Once we have married, we are no longer permitted, for example, to pursue career advancement without regard for how our decisions will affect our spouse and family. Our spouse may face career opportunities that must be passed up along the way as well. If both partners regard the marriage as the primary commitment in their lives, all other possibilities must be carefully weighed in terms of how they will impact that commitment. Does one partner desperately wish to own a certain new car? Does the other long for a larger television set? How will such choices affect common financial goals, such as saving for a house or for children's education? What is your shared view of the responsibility of Christian stewardship, and what part of your earnings are you called to share with others? Life together will be an ongoing process of seeking compromises between your individual wishes and the greater good of the marriage.

Again, there is a remarkable divine economy at work in a faithful process of compromise. Perhaps each of you turns down a significant career opportunity that would have moved you to another city where there was no suitable opportunity for the other. Instead, you both stay in positions that do not pay quite as well, or challenge you quite as much. But then new opportunities for growth and service emerge are likely to emerge in your current positions, or in the community where you have decided to remain. You learn that for every personal opportunity that is surrendered for the sake of the marriage, several new opportunities emerge. Over time you discover that compromise is not a matter of 'giving up' or 'giving in'. Rather, it is a specific spiritual path with its own rich blessings and rewards.

Healthy Marriage is Never Static

Social commentators argue that longer life spans may sound the death knell for the ideal of having but one marriage partner for life. If the marriage is allowed to become static, that may well be true. The irony is that serial marriage is static as well. Too often, people who marry two or more times do not change, and because they do not grow beyond a certain point, they must change their partners and start all over again. If marriage is lived covenantally, it will be experienced not as static and limiting, but as a continuously opening horizon, and there can be no greater adventure nor more satisfying joy than to share life's journey on through the process

of aging with the partner whose life you can no longer imagine as separate from your own!

3. Marriage, Church, and Community

We have seen that marriage is intended by God to bring rich gifts to the greater community and to free us from the self-preoccupation of individualism. But Christian marriage does not only *give* to community. To be strong and healthy, it must also *receive* from community. The relationship of marriage to Christian community is the relation of a part to the whole. As an arm gives to the body insofar as it functions for the good of the body, it also receives its life-blood, its very reason for being, from the body. In the same way, a married couple gives and receives in community.

What is Community?

The term is thrown about very loosely in our times. We routinely speak of “the community of investors” or “the sports community,” encompassing huge numbers of persons who hold a single interest in common. We likewise hear news commentators speak of “the community of nations,” a term which includes every human being on earth. Yet the term is also used to describe a specific neighborhood, or a group of good friends who gather for a summer picnic and softball game. Clearly we participate in community in different ways and on many different levels. But when we speak of community, we are always discussing a web of relationships among persons who share common needs, goals, ideals, or interests.

Unfortunately, the breakdown of community has been a disturbing theme of the last several decades. It has become rare to hear someone refer to himself or herself as a “citizen” -- a word which suggests that we are accountable to our nation’s shared ideals and common goals -- of the United States. Instead we speak of ourselves as “taxpayers,” a term which implies that we are individual “customers” purchasing services from the government. As customers, our role in common life is reduced to a function. Local community institutions such as the police department and public school system no longer command automatic respect and appreciation from those whom they serve, who are more likely to clamor for better service at lower cost. We bring to our community institutions and structures of government -- national, state, and local -- the same consumerist/functional expectations we take to the shopping mall.

We are less likely to know our immediate neighbors than we were twenty years ago: we wave to one another from behind the windows of our cars as we drive off to begin our fully scheduled day at work. Perhaps we stop by several stores on our way home, but it is not likely that we will take time to chat with the person behind the counter. A bland “have a nice day!” has taken the place of personal relationships with shopkeepers. In

the evenings we sit in the privacy of our individual homes, wearily collapsed in front of home entertainment systems before we tumble into bed. Even though we are the most affluent society in human history, we have allowed ourselves to become the loneliest people on the earth.

But the hunger for community, for a sense of belonging to something greater than ourselves that will give our lives meaning and purpose, runs deep and strong in us. Advertisers exploit this hunger, insisting that purchasing their products will make us members of a special community. We cover the clothing we wear with brand name logos, as if these will somehow confer upon us the sense of identity that was once drawn from sharing in community life. Community has become one more commodity to be packaged and sold. Too often, community is style rather than substance, more a matter of leisure consumption than common endeavors and common goods.

But this sort of manufactured and purchased 'community' cannot meet our need to know and be known by others, and it cannot help us to form a sustaining identity. Our need is to be in relationship with our fellow human beings. So we form our sense of community wherever it can be squeezed into full and busy lives: around the water cooler at work, within a golf or bowling league, with fellow parents of our children's play group. Still we sense that something is missing, that real community is not something we can schedule on our calendars like a dental appointment. Real community needs time to form and space to unfold. Real community involves a common history and a common place. It is not made up only of the persons we individually select. "Community," as one wit put it, "is where the person you least want to be with always is!"

True community is rich and varied, made up of both persons who share our tastes and interests and those who do not. It is sometimes comforting and sustaining, sometimes challenging or annoying. Because it is so much larger than we are, it forces us to adjust ourselves to its many sharp corners and rough edges. It hones and refines us, tests and seasons us. It provides us with mentors who can help to shape our life's direction in positive ways. It also places before us negative role models: persons we might become if we do not amend our less attractive traits. Community is a network of complex arrangements that make life risky, unpredictable, and rich. Communities are able to look back and tell interesting stories, tales of strange happenings, odd people, real heroes, and noble endeavors.

We know that we are entering into community when others see and know us in a multiplicity of roles. The communities "around the water cooler" or the "in the play group" are fragmented. They reflect the functional/consumer oriented fragmentation of our lives into separate spheres of work, play, parenting, and friends. When our co-workers enter our homes and come to know us as husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, they will begin to see us differently at work. When drinking

buddies become friends with our spouses, it is no longer easy to divide “Miller Time” from the responsibilities of home. Likewise, marriage forms our identity in community whether we are at home or with our families. Marriage in community is not a separate sphere or isolated activity. We help to shape community through our participation-- as mother, father, wife, husband, employee, neighbor, coach, and friend. We shape community even as the community, in turn, shapes and forms our individual lives.

Marriage and Community

A healthy marriage between two persons cannot exist in a vacuum. Each partner must participate in community as an individual, and the couple must likewise share a place in community together. The Christian ideal of marriage does not demand that those sharing it be all things to one another. Indeed, it argues that they cannot possibly be! Each needs his or her own web of human relationships that sustain, nurture, and challenge. Each needs to explore interests their partner may not share with other persons who do. One partner may feel called to political activism, the other to community service. One may have a soul that is fed by outdoor adventure while the other is spiritually nurtured by gardening. In a healthy marriage, we give one another our blessings to explore such personal interests in community with other persons, knowing that this will be enriching for our partner, who will bring these new experiences back into the marital relationship.

When we go forth from our marriage as an individual to share in such community, we must of course take our loyalty to the marriage with us. Although physically apart from our spouse, we carry his or her love and trust with us. If there is an interest we wish to pursue or a community in which we wish to participate that makes our partner uncomfortable, it should be honestly and thoroughly discussed beforehand. It may be impossible, for example, for our spouse to bless our desire to share in a mixed-gender scuba diving expedition to the Caribbean!

Couples must work together faithfully and lovingly to determine where the proper boundaries lie between unhealthy possessiveness and dangerous risk. Jealousy is sometimes destructive, but it grows from a healthy sense that intimate relationships need to be protected. Biblically, jealousy is a virtue of God’s love for humanity. God despairs when we turn away or seek out idols and false gods. Jealousy, positively put, is our desire to share ourselves. It is destructive when it turns to mistrust, suspicion, and selfishness. As friends, husband and wife ought to look out for each other’s good. If each partner does not have an individual life in community, the marriage will likely become ingrown and stultifying. One or both partners will not flourish. A healthy marriage must draw life from beyond itself.

You will also share in community life together as a couple, which is one of the primary ways in which a good marriage gives life beyond itself. You will socialize together, volunteer together, run errands together. These shared interactions with the wider community are critically important in discovering how you best function together as a “team.” Perhaps one of you is more outgoing than the other, blessed with the gift of small talk; you will learn how to use that gift to help your spouse feel at ease in a new social setting. Or maybe one of you is empathic, able to sense when a friend is in pain and to offer that friend emotional support, while the other has concrete problem-solving skills that can help that same friend find solutions to the painful situation. One partner’s delight in spontaneity can bring joy to a more controlled and rigid spouse, who in return may help save the other from terminal disorganization! By interacting together in community, we forge a shared identity as a couple -- a unique balance and blend -- that enriches both the marriage and the lives of others.

Church: The Called Community of Christ’s People

In choosing a Christian wedding ceremony, you are rooting your marriage in the special community of the Church. Sadly, today many people think of even the Church in an individualistic manner, treating it as secondary to their personal faith. This makes of the Church nothing more than a collection of individuals who gather together because they share certain interests and wish to obtain certain services that a particular congregation offers -- Sunday worship, church school, adult education, social fellowship, and youth groups. In our time, many people shop for a church in the same way they shop for a new car, searching for the one that “best meets our needs.”

But Christian faith is a communal experience, not an individual one. We sometimes call the Church “a community of formation,” for it is only as we share in the life of a congregation over time that we are inwardly formed into the people of Christ. Jesus called his followers to be “in the world, but not of it.” The Church at its best is a kind of counter-culture, participating in the life of American society while centering itself in a very different vision of how we are called to live our lives in the world. As we share in the life of the Church community over time, this vision begins to reside in us: Christ himself comes to dwell in our hearts. Among the specific practices of the Church community that guide our spiritual formation are corporate worship, Bible study, spiritual practices, and shared fellowship.

Corporate Worship

Sharing the experience of worship with the gathered community of faith has been called “the one hour of the week that places all the other hours in

proper perspective,” for in worshiping God alone we guard ourselves against worshiping our own wants and desires, or the icons of material success and prosperity. In worship we hear a story -- God’s story -- different from the seductive stories told by secular culture. Look around at those gathered on Sunday. We are young and old, rich and poor, wise and foolish, handsome and homely, good and not-so-good. We are gathered by God; it is quite unlikely that such a motley group would be together otherwise. Together, we are called beyond ourselves, beyond our personal limitations and narrow ideas of success. We are called to be a community in Christ.

In worship we sing our praises and lift up our prayers as a community. By sharing in the sacraments we experience the living presence of God in our midst. Holy Communion teaches us that because Christ gave his life in saving love for each of us, we can never be separate or apart from him or from one another: we truly are the body of Christ. When we accept an infant, child, or teen into the community of the Church through the sacrament of Baptism, we are reminded that we are all called to be parents to the children and youth of the Church. All of us, but especially the young, need to be surrounded by a loving “family in Christ,” pledged to their guidance and nurture, and committed to building a good and decent world in which they may grow.

Worship shifts our sights from the mundane to the sacred and lifts us out of our tendency to retreat into our own private worlds. Corporate worship lies at the very heart of the life of faith, and is the principle agent of our spiritual and social formation. A sound and strong Christian marriage will find its center in sharing with our partner in the experience of worship with the faith community each week. Sometimes a pleasure, and sometimes a trial, corporate worship is always our calling as Christians.

Bible Study

The Bible is not a rule book or encyclopedia, but the story of God’s love for the world and God’s calling out of a people – Israel and the Church – to be a sign and expression of that love. As we hear the Bible read in worship, study it with fellow Christians, or read it as part of our personal or family devotional life, we experience ourselves as participants in God’s unfolding plan of salvation for humankind. Different Christian traditions have varying ways of interpreting Holy Scripture, but agree that within this sacred story we will discover a strong anchor for our lives in God’s loving design rooted in communal structures of justice, peace, compassion, honesty, and moral integrity. God calls us, not so much to be perfect individuals, but to be a loving and graced-filled people.

While there is certainly value in reading the Bible on one’s own, it is in a very real sense “the book of the Church,” given to the community of Christ’s people to bind us together in common faith and practice. When

the priest or minister preaches a sermon based upon a passage of scripture, he or she is attempting to bring the rich resources of Church tradition -- the community of the Church extended through time -- and the wisdom of devout Christians, both living and deceased, to bear on God's word. The preacher is also attempting to apply God's word in scripture to the present challenges faced by those who have gathered as the Church. We are hearing the Bible in its proper context: within the Church community, where its truth may be most fully experienced. Likewise when we read and study the Bible with a group of fellow Christians we benefit from one another's insights and reflections. It is within such communal settings that the Bible comes most fully alive. The couple who shares in such study will find God's word shaping both their marriage and their individual lives in profound ways.

Spiritual Practices

The range of spiritual practices and disciplines honored by the Church is far too vast to cover here. They include core practices such as prayer, meditation, and service to others (feeding the hungry, visiting the prisoner, and comforting the afflicted). They also extend to more "esoteric" disciplines, such as fasting and silent retreats. Strictly speaking, there is no clear distinction between spiritual practices and practical work in the so-called "real world." Spiritual practices are those that serve both body and spirit to the end that we might be drawn nearer to God and to the human heart. In this regard, it is no mistake that spiritual works require that we face ourselves and the world in the silent moments of prayer and that we see Christ in the suffering and poor. Spiritual practices are directed toward envisioning the world and our own lives as God's good creation.

Married couples are urged to adopt one or more of these spiritual practices in a disciplined, intentional way in order to give their lives a common center. A growing number of married couples today are consciously attempting to observe the discipline of keeping Sabbath - of establishing one day each week where they make a sincere effort to refrain from shopping or working. In this "24/7" world where cell phones and pagers make it far too easy to think of ourselves as being "on call" at all times, observing one day of genuine rest from "business as usual" each week becomes an important way of affirming that our souls belong to God and not to the world. Likewise, many are giving their time and skills away, spending a considerable amount of hours serving those in need. Through such practices, we experience the wonderful paradox that the only way we can reclaim control of our lives is to turn our lives over to God's care and keeping.

Father Henri Nouwen, the great spiritual teacher, once spoke of spiritual practices and disciplines as the essence of *incarnational* theology (*incarnation* is how Christians speak of how God came to dwell in the

world through Jesus Christ, and also of how Christ may come to dwell in our hearts). Father Nouwen spoke of the “garbage” that bombards us all day long: radio, television, billboards, newspaper and magazine advertisements, etc. Fortunately, he noted, most of it goes in one ear and out the other. But some lodges in our minds (advertisers, of course, are quite skilled at making their message stay with us). And part of what lodges in our minds moves down into our hearts and takes up dwelling there; it becomes *incarnate* in us and shapes our sense of who and what we are. Spiritual practices and disciplines, Nouwen argued, are ways in which we attempt to take in less of the garbage and more of Jesus. “Something is going to dwell in our hearts,” Father Nouwen said. “We must choose whether it will be garbage or God.” Couples who embrace specific spiritual practices and disciplines of the church center their lives, and their marriage, in God’s presence.

Fellowship and Mutual Support

The typical Christian congregation is made up of a diverse collection of people who, as one person put it, “have nothing at all in common except the only thing that really matters.” The one thing that matters, of course, is that Christ died for each of us, and called us into this fellowship. Therefore, as different as we are from one another and flawed though we may be, we are called not just to “get along” with each other, but to genuinely care for one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. We pray for one another in times of illness. We celebrate with one another in times of joy and grieve together in times of loss. We help one another through life’s rough patches. We teach one another’s children about God in the Church School. We witness the exchange of vows when members of the Church community come before God to pledge themselves in marriage. In the Church, we allow God to show us what it means to live together as a faithful community.

It is within the give and take, the shared identity, and the mutual support of the Church community that a healthy Christian marriage is formed and shaped over time. By sharing in community practices, we cease to think of ourselves only as individuals, or of our marriage as something that can exist separately and apart from community life. God made us to be in relationship with both God and with other people; God made us for community.

4. The Church Community and Your Wedding

No doubt the planning for your wedding day began long ago. Reserving a suitable hall or banquet room for a wedding reception sometimes must be done a full year in advance, and many couples likewise may spend months searching for the perfect wedding dress, a photographer who understands their wishes, suitable rings, etc. The logistics of planning a wedding can

be overwhelming! It is also the rare planning process that does not lead to a conflict or two along the way. Families may have different expectations about the religious context of the ceremony, or struggle over the number of guests to be invited. Many couples, exhausted by the entire ordeal, have secretly wondered whether elopement might have been a better choice!

Weddings can be terribly expensive as well. It is not uncommon for persons of modest means to spend \$20,000 or more for a wedding when all expenses are tallied. If their families are not able to bear all of these expenses, the couple themselves may start their new life together with significant debt from their wedding day, hardly an ideal way to begin marriage. Much of the marketing of wedding goods and services is built around the theme of “your one, perfect day!” so that the couple are made to feel that they are somehow cheating themselves or their guests if they do not go “first class” with each purchase. “Yes, we have regular unity candles, but this is your wedding day! These beautiful unity oil lamps have two wicks that form a single flame, just as your two lives form one perfect union!” From the florist to the limousine service, the caterer to the photographer, you are told that this special, once-in-a-lifetime day is not a time to scrimp or cut corners. The inevitable result is that the day becomes more of a spectacle than an experience of community love and support for your union, one that cannot possibly live up to the expectations of perfection that have been created.

The wise couple will view their wedding day, and the rituals that surround it, as the portal through which they will pass into their new world of married life together, a day that symbolically establishes the tone for the kind of life they hope to share. On the wedding day, a celebration is in order – two are joining together to live out the steadfast love of God! Eating good food and rejoicing in song and dance are important ways to express a community’s joy. A married couple’s call to communion with each other and with neighbors, friends, the poor, and the stranger is nothing other than the gospel vocation of hospitality. When Jesus offers his disciples an image of God’s gracious community, he uses the image of a wedding banquet where all are welcome.

We ought to bring out our best for our wedding receptions as a way to express the hospitality of Christian marriage. We should take care not to fall into a “market-driven” definition of what is our best. Our best comes from who we are together, and what we have to give. Expensive receptions and extravagant wedding “outfits” only hold marriage up to an impossible ideal – to the excessiveness of our consumer culture. Excessiveness during wedding celebrations, whether excessive drinking or spending, can be a sign of anxiety about the prospects of marriage. When we fear our lives together, we are likely to overdo our weddings as a way to avoid facing the seriousness of the vows we are taking. Honest joy over the covenant of marriage will be festive but not manic. As a portal, or

passageway, into a couple's life together, wedding celebrations can be wonderful opportunities to extend Christian love and hospitality-- to express the essential communal character of the Christian life.

The Community

Had we lived several hundred years ago, we likely would not have needed to struggle with a guest list. We would have simply invited everyone we knew! Our family and friends would have lived in the same town or village and likely attended the same church, and the entire community would have been invited to the wedding. For most couples today, the matter is far more complicated. Each of you have family systems that you will want (or need) to invite. Some relatives will travel great distances in order to be present. Others will bring complicated patterns of divorce and remarriage, making the etiquette of "who sits where" bewildering. The bride and groom will likely each have circles of personal friends, some dating back to childhood or college, others from the workplace, and then there are the friends you have in common as a couple. Will you draw the line at aunts and uncles, or will cousins be included? And what about Uncle Henry, who always drinks too much at receptions and launches into his theories about alien abduction? Are the bride's mother's two sisters still refusing to speak to one another? And if the budget we carefully agreed upon only permits 125 people to be invited to dinner, is it really fair that the groom's family, which is considerably larger than the bride's, will occupy 45 of those seats, excluding valued friends you really wish to be present?

These decisions can be tiresome, and often lead to bickering within families. Certainly they serve as a dramatic reminder that the wedding is not just about the two of you as a couple! You each bring your families of origin with you to the relationship, and as a couple you will need to continue to share a healthy, caring relationship with both family systems. Compromise in these decisions, as in many other dimensions of wedding planning, is the order of the day. By honoring the budget agreed upon and attempting to be welcoming and inclusive of both families, you will ground your marriage in the sincere intention of looking beyond your own desires.

Creative couples find ways to include valued friends in their wedding even when they cannot all be invited to the reception. Disturbingly, it has become socially acceptable in some regions of the country for guests to attend the reception without first coming to the church for the wedding ceremony. The message these guests give, intended or not, is that they are happy to eat your food, but do not value you sufficiently to witness the vows you exchange before God. Couples who sincerely desire the blessings brought by their entire community of friends and family are becoming less reluctant to invite persons to the church who cannot be included in the reception.

Sometimes these guests receive an invitation to the ceremony that includes an invitation to an informal party that will take place several weeks later. Likewise, if one or both of you are active members of the church where the wedding service will take place, you may wish to issue a broad invitation to that congregation to be present for the ceremony. They, after all, constitute the faith community in which your marriage will be grounded in the years to come. You may wish to hold a brief and simple “mini-reception,” perhaps with punch and cake, at the church immediately after the ceremony so that those not included in the formal reception may have the opportunity to celebrate with you.

There are many different ways to include the various communities in which you participate in your wedding. With careful, realistic planning, you can ensure that the people you most want and need to have present can be there to participate. It is important to keep in mind that in the New Testament wedding banquets are symbolic of God’s grace. As such, these biblical feasts include respectable guests and less distinguished ones, even strangers who have been invited off the street. Wedding ceremonies and receptions can be ways to help form community and to welcome those who would be surprised to be invited. The wedding day is not a means to “show off” but to offer the gift of communion to others.

The Rituals of Community

Depending upon the region of the country in which you live and the cultural traditions that prevail there, the community will participate in various stages of preparing for your marriage. It may begin with an engagement party to celebrate your decision to marry. Then there are the showers, which come in a bewildering array these days: traditional bridal showers, groom’s showers centered in items for workshop and garden, and showers designed to include couples. At their best, these showers can be a way for the community to say “You are going to get married and set up a house or apartment together. It is challenging, but it is important for all our lives that you succeed. We are the people who want to share that journey with you, and we are giving you some of the things you will need to begin that journey.” Showers are a tangible way in which the community offers us their support.

One of the authors of this booklet looked back upon those showers and noted that he and his wife received things they did not know they needed at the time. Years later, when they did need them and discovered that they already had them, it was quite a revelation: they were the beneficiaries of the community’s wisdom. Showers are a way in which the community can help us prepare for our marriages by training us in the practices of marriage and family life. Showers and other pre-nuptial gatherings reflect the communal landscape for a marriage – community wisdom, support, and the role of marriage in the lives of those gathered.

They are means for a community to speak well of fidelity, steadfast love, raising children, and keeping a hospitable home.

Sometimes showers bring a more mixed message from the community. Today we are seeing the proliferation of what are sometimes called “toy showers,” in which the couple is given items that speak to their special interests: camping gear, sports equipment, etc. Certainly it is generous of friends to give such gifts, and they are right to suggest that the couple must create time and space to share leisure pursuits together. But there is also a suggestion that the acquisition of material goods is a central dimension of marriage, and that our unity and common life is founded on leisure consumption. These consumerist themes slip into more traditional showers when they descend to the level of competition about who gave the most expensive gift, or whether the bride received as large a “haul” as her sister did when she was married last year. As a couple, you may or may not be able to influence what sort of showers the community offers. You can, and must, control how you appropriate their meaning into your marriage.

Bachelor and bachelorette parties are also a common community ritual of preparation for marriage. Historically, such events offered the persons preparing to marry the opportunity to say a graceful farewell to the things being left behind so that the new responsibilities and opportunities of marriage could be assumed, and were centered upon sharing stories and remembrances with old friends. Such pre-nuptial events, in short, were rites of passage. Today they are more commonly thought of as a “final fling,” with an emphasis on indulging in activities that represent the “freedom” that will soon be left behind. At the least this may mean a night of heavy drinking and carousing. In more extreme cases it may mean hiring a prostitute for a bachelor party, or a male stripper for a bachelorette party. Persons committed to Christian marriage simply will not participate in such events, which are not only morally degrading, but also perpetuate the myth that marriage means giving up their precious “freedom.” Bachelor and bachelorette parties of this kind give a shallow expression to one’s passage into a new form of life.

Far too many of the unhealthy rituals surrounding marriage are rooted in the distorted view that the wedding means that the bride gains security while the groom surrenders freedom. There are still wedding photographers who pose shots of the groom attempting to escape from the church while his attendants restrain him. Men in particular should be deeply offended by this sort of “ball and chain” humor and what it implies about their maturity. Such images, reinforced throughout our culture, can eat away at us below the surface, feeding the nagging suspicion that perhaps we really have given up more than we realize. As the proliferation of bachelorette parties, some of them fully as raunchy as bachelor parties, demonstrate, this is no longer just an issue for men. If there are to be such

parties, you must be certain that you participate in their planning to ensure that they will not undermine your values, or your understanding of marriage.

5. Your Wedding Ceremony

In the midst of these complex logistics, worrisome expenses, and complicated family politics, planning your actual wedding ceremony with the officiating member of the clergy should be a kind of sanctuary where the three of you can focus on the essential meaning of the commitment you are making before God. Your clergyperson will share with you the specific expectations and parameters established by the faith tradition in which you will be married. But almost all Christian wedding ceremonies hold certain things in common (although they may be expressed in various ways, or come in a different order). Your ceremony will be, above all, an occasion of sacred worship in which God is praised and glorified for the new thing that God is bringing into being through your holy union. Among the components commonly included in the ceremony are these.

•*Words of Welcome and Statement of Meaning*

Your clergyperson will welcome the guests on your behalf, and briefly state the church's understanding of the purpose for which they have gathered. God's presence will be sought through a prayer of invocation.

•*The Charge to the Couple*

The presiding clergyperson will state the commitment you plan to make, and ask each of you whether it is your intention to honor the vows and commitments you will soon exchange before God and the gathered community.

•*The Blessing from the Parents*

This may take many forms, from the traditional giving of the bride by her father to having each set of parents give their blessings to your decision to offer your lives to one another. Sometimes the mothers (or both parents) light the tapers that you will later use to light a unity candle; in other services the couple present roses or other symbolic gifts to their parents.

•*The Homily or Sermon*

The presiding priest or minister will share wisdom, drawn from Holy Scripture, about the meaning of Christian marriage.

•*Readings*

Taken from Scripture, these are read by a guest, or by the member of the clergy. The readings bring God's word into the service of sacred union.

•*Music*

There may be, in the course of the service, musical selections which add beauty and meaning to the ceremony. Understandably, most churches insist that the music reflect the sacred meaning of the occasion.

•*The Exchange of Vows*

Whether traditional or contemporary, the vows you exchange will speak of your commitment to a lifelong union of fidelity, mutual love, and service.

•*Lighting a Unity Candle*

Common in many traditions and done in various ways, lighting a candle speaks of two becoming one.

•*The Exchange of Rings*

The clergy person will speak of the meaning of the rings as tokens of your commitment, and will likely bless them with a prayer before they are exchanged.

•*The Pronouncement*

In a moving and profound moment, the presiding member of the clergy pronounces that you are now husband and wife, and pray that what God has created, no person or circumstance should ever be permitted to undo.

•*Response of the Guests*

In some traditions, the gathered community is asked to read together from the wedding program their affirmation of that which they have witnessed.

•*The Sacrament of Holy Communion*

In some traditions, notably within Roman Catholicism, Holy Communion offers a sign of the grace-giving presence of God in your union, and in the community which has gathered with you. In other traditions the sacrament is omitted, in deference to guests of other religious traditions who may experience discomfort when the bread and cup are shared.

•*Wedding Prayer and Final Blessing*

The officiating clergy person will ask God's blessing upon your new marriage, and send you forth in God's love and grace.

There are many variations, of course, and often the clergy person will be very open to working with you on ways to bring special elements into your ceremony. But these essential components insure that your wedding ceremony will be both worshipful and meaningful. Any other elements you wish to introduce should be carefully evaluated to make certain they do not disrupt the tone of sacred worship that has been so carefully established.

Your clergy person will also be very helpful in many other dimensions of planning for your service. At the wedding rehearsal, he or she will review the logistics of how the wedding party enters and leaves the church, and how you set up the receiving line. Do share with the presiding clergy person any special concerns about complicated family dynamics that may affect seating and other matters; you will find that he or she is equipped to handle these matters with tact and diplomacy.

6. Beyond Your Wedding Day

Marriage is a never-ending series of joys, challenges, adjustments and gifts, which are properly understood as occasions for growth. Within the

Christian life, marriage is a pathway for an ongoing transformation of our relationships and the up building of community. Properly understood, marriage is not only the union of two, but also a way of life with others that implies roles and responsibilities at work and at home.

Marriage is also an avenue of receiving grace and care. It is our hope that your relationship with the pastor who presides at your wedding ceremony is but the beginning of an ongoing relationship to which you can turn whenever you sense that your pastor's perspective can be of help in your unfolding marriage. He or she will not have all the answers, of course, but will offer the resources and wisdom of a community called to gather in God's name. The people in your Church want to support you and to be an important part of your lives.

Marriage does not set a couple apart, but puts them in the middle of things. The romantic attitudes of our culture picture moments of love in the isolation of exotic beaches or intimate dinners at expensive restaurants. In reality, marriage sets our lives within networks of family, friends, and neighbors. Through married life, a couple's connections to others become deeper. If we hold on to the romantic idea we will experience these deep connections as a threat to love rather than as a wonderful opportunity to let love and hospitality expand in our lives.

Christian marriage is the beginning of a lifelong adventure together. If this adventure unfolds within the community of believers we call the Church of Jesus Christ, there is every reason to believe that it will be rich, full, joyous, and a blessing to others! However, as an adventure, married life will include obstacles, struggles and disappointments. As a couple embarks on the journey of a shared life, they ought to expect the unexpected. They should expect to be transformed. The Christian hope is that a couple can look back on decades of married life and see God's goodness working through the trials and joys. Through sharing our lives in community, we can have faith that our married love will be transformed and reach a depth that we could not have imagined on our wedding day.

Further Reading

Catherine Mile Wallace, *For Fidelity: How Intimacy and Commitment Enrich Our lives*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1999. Wallace, a poet, argues with eloquence for fidelity in marriage, other relationships, and life in general. She includes a helpful section on discussing fidelity and monogamy with children.

Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads: Beyond Traditional & Modern Options*. Intersivity Press, 1993.