

**WHOLE MARRIAGES
IN A
BROKEN WORLD**

*God's Design
for a
Healthy Marriage*

Gary Inrig

Whole Marriages in a Broken World
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1

Love Story

THE MEDIA CALLED IT “the wedding of the century.” According to the Archbishop of Canterbury it was “the stuff of which fairy tales are made.” So on July 29, 1981, hundreds of dignitaries crowded St. Paul’s Cathedral, hundreds of thousands filled the streets of London, and hundreds of millions of people around the world sat in front of their television sets, interrupting work or sleep to share the spectacle of a royal wedding. The marriage of the beautiful young school teacher and the heir to the British throne captured the fancy of the world.

But what began with such pomp, pageantry, and promise has unraveled publicly and painfully until all that remains is an empty shell—two people living separate lives in separate places bound only by their children and the power of the monarchy. An industry has grown up around the death of the marriage—assigning blame and circulating gossip. Whatever the future holds for Charles and Diana, their tragic story reminds us that fairy tales don’t end the way they used to: “so they were married, and lived happily ever after.”

Some cynics tell us that what happened to Charles and Diana was inevitable. Marriage, they tell us, is a doomed institution, a relic of an outmoded era. In the emerging twenty-first century,

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long-range, healthy, and stable marriages will be as viable as saber-toothed tigers. The only alternative is to develop more realistic options.

At first glance, such an opinion makes sense. We are daily made aware of how difficult marriage in the 1990s is. We encounter spiraling divorce rates, dysfunctional families, abusive relationships, “alternative” living arrangements, and homosexual partnerships. There are times when the media makes it appear that traditional marriage no longer works and something (or anything) must take its place. This may, in fact, be the most challenging time and culture in history in which to build a marriage that not only endures but becomes a source of love, fulfillment, and growth.

However, such marriages are not only possible but essential. The answer to the onslaught is not to be found in the reinvention of marriage but in the recovery of biblical marriage. Stable, thriving, satisfying marriages are possible if they are built upon the essential truths of God’s Word by people willing to follow Christ consistently. There are no pat formulae or magic solutions. But there are hard answers for those who are willing to follow Christ in consistent obedience. Sometimes He will lead us counterculture. Other times He will lead us counter-tradition. But He is always leading us toward a relationship that reflects His eternal purpose for marriage.

One of the most striking biblical truths about marriage is that it is meant to be a portrayal of the greatest relationship in creation—the relationship between God and His people. Nothing could invest marriage with greater dignity or deeper significance than that comparison. Most often, when we think of that picture, we begin with what we have seen (human marriage) and try to understand the greater truth—the relation between Christ and His church. But our world doesn’t present us with many healthy models of marriage. Therefore, in a world as confused as ours is about marriage, it is helpful to reverse the process: to look at the relationship between Christ and the church for what it can teach us about the relationship between husband and wife. That is clearly Paul’s intention in his greatest statement about marriage—Ephesians 5:21–33, and as we begin, we want to look at his picture

in the broadest sense, to gain a concept of what God sees as the essential ingredients of a thriving, healthy relationship.

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband. (Ephesians 5:21–33)

Bookstore shelves are full of books on marriage, many of them describing the reasons marriages fail. Such books are usually written by therapists, who spend their time working with clients whose marriages are experiencing meltdown. A great deal can obviously be learned from marital pathology. We need to know why marriages fail. But the absence of death doesn't mean the presence of health. Many marriages are sick but never die in divorce or separation. So the most important question is why some marriages thrive and enjoy vigorous good health. Models of success are priceless in a world filled with failures. That is where Ephesians 5 helps us, by illuminating three essential qualities of a thriving marriage.

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A THRIVING MARRIAGE EXPRESSES CHRISTLIKE LOVE

To say that a thriving marriage expresses love is a truism, even a platitude. But the essential question is, “What does love look like?” “What does love do?” That is the point at which Paul is so practical and yet so profound. The love that causes a marriage to thrive is modeled on Christ’s love for His people, the church, and that love can be described in very specific ways. There are three distinct characteristics Paul discovers in the love of Christ.

First, Christ becomes for us the *pattern* of love, and that pattern is *sacrifice*. “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” Paul’s focus is not on God’s characteristic love for His people but on the specific love of Calvary: “Christ *loved* the church.” This is important. It means that, in biblical terms, love is defined, not by the sweaty palms and beating heart of infatuated adolescents or the steamy passions of a Hollywood romance, but by the cross of Christ. Love produces sacrificial action. It is seen not just in what Christ felt but in what He did. “He loved the church and gave Himself up for her.” The Lord Jesus was King of glory, Lord of heaven, eternal God. He could have given many things for the church, but He gave Himself, and that giving was based not on the church’s merit or performance, but on her need.

The point is that *all that He has He gives for the church*. The love of Christ is the touchstone: true love means the sacrificial giving of self for the well-being of the loved one, whatever the cost to the lover and whatever the merit of the loved one.

I am overwhelmed by that. As a college student I met and fell deeply in love with Elizabeth. In many ways it was the easiest thing I ever did. I delight in her beauty, revel in her zest for life, and warm myself on her giving, caring persona. I find myself amazed at the privilege of sharing life with her.

But on a deeper level, loving her is the hardest thing I have ever done—not because of her, but because of me. Far too many times I want to love in a way that is comfortable and convenient to me. I want to love her for my good, not hers. I grew up in a family of boys and in a context of sports. It didn’t take long to realize that the bantering humor and smart sarcastic rejoinders that worked

well in the locker room didn't have the same effect on her. Over and over I found myself bruising her spirit with my insensitivity, and sadly I didn't even know it until I would find her hiding away in the university library, tears filling her eyes as she fearfully looked at the man she loved and wanted to trust, who all too often loved her in a way that met his needs, not hers.

I am still learning about the cross of love, thirty years later. Love gives itself up and gives itself away. It sacrifices—surrendering what it values for something it values even more. Sometimes the cost is trivial—the sacrifice of an evening watching a football game. Sometimes it is profound—the sacrifice of her availability and the financial cost of her going back to school so she can pursue a dream. But love means that I care for my partner more than anything else. A healthy marriage isn't about getting my fair share or giving my fair share. The cross wasn't about fairness. It was about need. And with the gift of sacrificial love I give the wonderful gift of *security*. “All that I have, I give for you, as Christ did for me.”

Paul also wants us to reflect on the second characteristic of Christ's love, the *purpose* of love. Christ's love is not just powerful in its sacrifice, it is purposeful in its intention. “He gave himself up for her to make her holy . . . and to present her to himself as a radiant church.” Christ's love is a transforming, empowering love. It comes to us where we are but it refuses to leave us there. It comes to us in our sin and unholiness and makes no requirement other than that we acknowledge those facts. But His love makes us holy. That means at least two things. To be holy is to be set apart, reserved for an owner and his purpose. I buy a pair of shoes and begin to wear them. At first they pinch and chafe and irritate my feet. The soles are too smooth and they slip easily on carpet or grass. But gradually those shoes are shaped to my feet and fit so comfortably that I hate to discard them and start over. In a special way, those shoes are holy. They belong to me and fit me and my purposes, and don't fit anyone else in quite the same way.

The Lord made us holy when He purchased us. At salvation, He sets us apart to be His people and, over the course of time, He is shaping us to fit His purposes. We were created to be this way, but sin

has made us unholy. To become holy is to become what I was always intended to become—the realization of my God-given uniqueness.

The Lord also purposes to present the church to Himself as a radiant, splendid, glorious church. Paul is looking forward to the “wedding day,” the culmination point of salvation history when the church, raptured and resurrected, is presented to Christ at His second coming. Imagine how we will look then—with all of the defilements and disfigurements and imperfections of this fallen world part of the past. We will be radiant in our new bodies with our renewed spirits, wearing the righteousness of Christ “without stain [of sin] or wrinkle [of mortality] or any other blemish [of fallenness], but holy and blameless [because of Christ].” That is the goal of it all—when you and I stand cleansed and qualified to be in God’s holy presence. And it will be entirely due to Jesus Christ. By the sheer power of His love we will be transformed.

The Lord’s love means that *all that He does, He does for the church*. His love is transforming, empowering, liberating. We are becoming what God intends.

There is a danger in pushing the illustration of Christ’s love too far. After all, He is absolutely perfect and we certainly are not. Yet I am convinced there is an important lesson here. True love is empowering. We should not marry our partners to change them. Marriage isn’t a reformatory. But the fact is that marriage will change us. No two people can live in marital proximity and be unchanged. The great question is, which way will they be changed? Will they be enlarged or diminished? Will they be enabled or disabled? Will they be empowered or exhausted?

I am convinced that if I truly love my wife, she will be empowered to become what God created her to be. Her God-intended design will become evident as she manifests her unique identity and the likeness of Jesus Christ. True love sanctifies and empowers—it enables the loved person to be what God intended.

It has done that for me. Elizabeth’s encouragement has enabled me to do things I might have avoided, because I fear failure. Her insight has helped me evaluate myself and my circumstances; her godliness has deepened my trust in God. And at times I can glimpse things in her life that are there because I watered a seed

of giftedness with encouragement and support. To live with an empowering love is to give the gift of *significance* to our partner.

There is a third way in which Christ models love. Paul sees in his relation to us the *provision* of love. “No one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church.” There is a double illustration here. We are sensitive to the needs of our physical bodies. We try to be wise enough not to cater to their desires but to respond to their needs. So when they are hungry, we feed them. When they are cold, we warm them (the words *care for* literally mean “to warm”). We value our bodies enough to treat them with respect. In fact, the care and feeding of the body in all its various forms is the main economic engine of every society.

In the same way, Christ feeds and cares for His church. He not only loved her enough to die for her, He loves her enough to provide her with all she needs. Two thousand years after Calvary, the church exists in every nation on earth, sustained, supported, and enriched even in the most difficult circumstances by the love, grace, and power of Jesus Christ. His provision is a daily experience for every child of God. *All that she needs, He provides for the church.*

The application to marriage is obvious. True love brings the gift of *support*, a sensitivity to my partner’s personal, emotional, and physical needs. Unlike Christ I cannot provide all my wife’s needs, but I can accept the responsibility to nurture and cherish. Marriages thrive when love is “fed.” Marriages flourish when people are “cared for,” warmed, and cherished.

What does love look like? It looks like Christ:

*All that He has, He gives for the church,
and in that gift of sacrifice, we find security.*
*All that He does, He does for the church,
and in that gift of empowerment, we discover significance.*
*All that she needs, He provides for the church,
and in that gift of provision, we experience support.*

Christ loved the church enough to die for her, and that expression of love is indispensable to a thriving marriage. But there

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is another side to the illustration. The church responds to Christ's love. The church loves Christ enough to live for Him and in that response is the second essential.

A THRIVING MARRIAGE EXPERIENCES INTIMACY

Paul's description of Christ and the church employs another metaphor to emphasize the oneness that exists between His people and Himself: "we are members of his body." This is a favorite idea of the apostle. A relationship with Christ involves oneness—a unity not only like that of marriage but like that of the body. Our physical bodies operate on the principles of unity, diversity, and interdependence. In the same way spiritually, we are joined inseparably to Christ, made dependent for our love upon Him.

The union of Christ and the church is, in another way, like marriage. The body suggests we are dependent and interdependent. Marriage requires spiritual and emotional intimacy. Our unity with Christ does not diminish our identity. Christ will always be the Son of God—never less than that. And we will always be creatures—never more than that. We do not become "gods," neither do we lose our distinct personalities, as if the "bride of Christ" is one undifferentiated mass. Nevertheless we will share eternally in a dynamic, enduring intimacy with Christ.

Marriage has the same quality. A husband and wife are not simply companions and life partners, they are one flesh. In their union something new has come into being, bigger than either or both of them. There is "Gary" and there is "Elizabeth," but now there is also "Gary and Elizabeth," a new "being" which must be cared for, protected, and cherished. If this is forgotten, marriage descends into a living arrangement inhabited by two "married singles," who have aborted the "one flesh" God intends to create.

Peggy Noonan, who often writes with an insightful eye on modern culture, describes a conversation with a friend about life in the social circles of New York City:

"Tell me about the marriages," I said. "Are those couples . . . in love? I mean, do they love each other?"

He said, “A lot of these marriages are deals. The marriage is a deal and you both do your part, whatever it is It’s her first marriage, his second. They look good together, they love their children, and their marriage is about acquiring and appearing.”

“Do they love each other?”

“No. The action for them isn’t the love part, it’s the having part. Having a pink-cheeked baby in the best stroller, in a hundred-dollar dress. Having an attractive wife or a handsome husband with graying hair. She’s not interested in him anymore, and he doesn’t really much like her. But they have a beautiful apartment on Park in the Eighties. They are a social and economic unit. It’s a deal.”

“Do they sleep together?”

“Yeah, it’s part of the deal.”¹

Deals aren’t just part of New York social life. Many Christian marriages are, in fact, deals. Couples have settled for a social arrangement that bears no resemblance to the model established by Christ and the church.

In a 1983 study two researchers wanted to learn how married couples and couples who are living together but not married handled decisions and resolved conflicts. Each couple was asked what they would do if they were given six hundred dollars to spend as they pleased. The researchers observed that married couples viewed the money as a joint possession and assumed they would decide together how to spend it. Cohabitors, on the other hand, viewed the money as something to be divided in two, with neither having the use of the partner’s share. Most strikingly, the researchers observed that troubled marriages reacted like cohabitators. They viewed money, time, and possessions as personal property rather than as joint assets. That was “the deal.”

In contrast, biblical marriage can’t be reduced to a business arrangement. A one-flesh relationship isn’t a deal, but a summons to oneness. Intimacy is not the creation of a moment, the product of a ceremony. It is the product of a lifetime, the process of sharing life. In the church’s response to Christ we can see the basis of intimacy.

First, intimacy requires *unreserved trust*. The key to our relationship with Christ is confidence in His person. We are saved

by faith, and we walk by faith. As we trust Him, we find that He is utterly trustworthy, and so we trust Him more.

Marital intimacy grows in the soil of trust and trustworthiness. Those two are inseparably linked. Marital intimacy requires and gives trust, and wise couples will do nothing that imperils the trust between them. When the writer of Proverbs celebrates the wife of noble character, he proclaims, “The heart of her husband trusts in her” (Proverbs 31:11 NASB). Remarkably, almost everywhere else in Scripture we are counseled to trust in God, not people. Marriage is a striking exception. Trust and trustworthiness build a safe place where intimacy thrives. A healthy marriage is a place of trust.

Second, the church responds to Christ with *unselfish loyalty*. She cooperates with His purposes. “As the church submits to Christ” becomes the model of marriage. The s word of submission is an unpopular one in the modern world, but it is the underlying principle of marriage: “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” We will consider in a later chapter the particular way wives and husbands are to live out that submission, but the church’s model is clear. We actively pursue Christ’s goals and purposes. The only alternative is another, far more sinister s word, “selfishness.”

Marriage forces us to choose the s word that will be our operating principle. Selfishness or submission—there are no third options. In the final analysis, we are called to the active pursuit of God’s goals and purposes, an unselfish loyalty to this one-flesh commitment which means we put into practice Philippians 2:3–4: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

The third ingredient of intimacy is *utter respect*. The church lives out a commitment to Christ’s glory. In an ocean of indifference and antagonism to the Son of God, the church exists to praise His name and promote His glory. We refuse to treat Him lightly or casually.

Marriage is meant to be an island of respect as well. The world diminishes people, uses them, or is massively indifferent to them. Yesterday’s heroes are tomorrow’s nobodies. The people who

applaud you when you perform ignore you when you fail. But a couple reaching for intimacy refuses to take each other for granted or to affirm the world's indifference or antagonism. "I like you, I want you, I value you, I love being with you, you matter to me more than anyone else"—that is the anthem of intimacy. Healthy couples focus on what they love about one another and build on the positive.

There is a third principle embodied in the words of Paul in Ephesians 5. This moves away from the specifics of the relationship between Christ and the church and asks us to evaluate and embrace the values on which that relationship is based.

A THRIVING MARRIAGE EMBRACES CORE VALUES

First and foremost, a thriving marriage recognizes that *the resource for marriage is Christ*. We come to marriage as sinful and needy people. Because we are fallen people, we have developed sinful habits. Because we live in a fallen world, we have been sinned against and we have become victims of our own sin. As hurt and needy people, we all too often expect people close to us to meet our needs. But our needs are too deep for marriage alone to satisfy. All too many marriages fail, not because people expect too little of marriage, but because they expect too much. "He's the one." "She's the one who'll make me feel better." *But no person can do for us what only God can do*. If I ignore that, I am headed for inevitable disillusionment. If I operate out of my neediness, I will overburden my spouse. If I operate in my sinfulness, I will exploit and manipulate her.

That is why the cross is not only the model of love, it is the source of love. Only Christ can give me the forgiveness, grace, and power that frees me from the guilt and habits of sin. Only Christ can give me the love, peace, and freedom that enables me to be a giver and not just a taker.

Being married for almost thirty years is a profoundly humbling experience. In the course of time I have accumulated a huge inventory of failures, sins, and blunders. Yet Elizabeth continues to love me with a tenacious love. Clearly it's not because I'm so

lovable. It has far more to do with the fact that she is loving. But I would have drained her supply decades ago except for the fact that she has an endless fountain of love through her relationship to Christ. Because of Him, there is always more for me to drink.

A second indispensable truth is that *the principle of marriage is grace*. This clearly follows from the first, since Christ is the fountain of grace. Strikingly, Ephesians 5:21–33 never uses the word *grace* but every verse is full of it. Christ responds to our need, not our merit. He provides all we need, not just a portion. The whole passage is rich in the picture of His compassion, kindness, mercy, and goodness. Grace means that we are accepted and forgiven.

Thriving marriages are grace-full. *Grace* means to accept and to be accepted. God doesn't put us on trial, making us walk a tightrope of performance so that one day we can reach a platform of acceptance. Grace-full partners give each other the benefit of the doubt and choose to focus on what they like about the other, rather than on what they don't like. Grace means to forgive and to be forgiven, a concept we will return to later because it is so important in a thriving marriage. Failure is inevitable because sinners are the only people who get married. Grace is the process in which two people who own their sin and failure and enjoy God's grace and forgiveness will extend the same to those who sin against and fail them.

A third core value embedded in Ephesians 5 is that *the pattern of marriage is ministry*. Again we face a choice. One way is manipulation—we use others to meet our needs. Living as we do in a culture absorbed with protecting rights and achieving self-actualization, it is easy to turn marriage into competition. But the way of Christ is servanthood, submission, ministry—the choice to meet needs. The Lord models for us that lordship doesn't mean personal satisfaction but personal service.

David Mace has observed that strong families are serving families. “The members of these families liked each other, and kept on telling each other that they liked each other. They affirmed each other, gave each other a sense of personal worth, and took every reasonable opportunity to speak and act affectionately. The result,

very naturally, was that they enjoyed being together and reinforced each other in ways that made their relationship very satisfying.”²

The problem with fairy tale romances is that they don't last very well in a hard-reality world. Charles and Diana's wedding was a marvelous spectacle for those who like such things, but life in the palace proved far tougher than pageantry in the cathedral. That is why the Bible is, from one perspective, so utterly unsentimental about marriage. We have turned the cross into religious unreality, a pious symbol stripped of its bloody brutality. Imagine carting an electric chair down the aisle immediately before the bridal procession or decorating a Valentine's card with a hangman's noose! But what Scripture forces us to do is to stand at the foot of the cross and confront its hard-nail reality. There, more clearly than anywhere else, I can see what love looks like and begin to realize the call that marriage places upon me. More importantly, it is there that by faith I experience the Lord of the cross and His love, and I am set free to share that love in my family. The cross is a love story that is no fairy tale, and its message does make it possible to live “happily every after.”