

Return-Path: <dwightj@writeme.com> **Date:** Wed, 18 Aug 1999 20:34:27 -0400
From: Dwight Jester <dwightj@writeme.com>
Subject: Re: True covenant and marriage

This is a strong article on covenant as it relates to marriage. I am sending you part one. There are three parts to it and I will send each part separately since it is too long to send in one email. In Him, Dwight

And the Two Shall Be One

by Mark Toohey

Part One of Covenant and marriage

There is a great and profound mystery at work in the earth today; so great a mystery that it was first initiated in Eden's long ago garden and secured by a covenant of death. This ponderous mystery is a product of heaven itself, born out of the incomprehensible wisdom of God, and imparted unto man wholly by His grace; and yet this mystery is known unto all. Multitudes of men and women partake of its sublime reality every day of their lives, unaware of the magnitude of its portent. It is trampled under foot, mocked, and discarded as much as it is revered, cherished, and made sacred by those who have given themselves to it. In the realm of spirit it is the revelation of the highest calling of God upon the life of a man or woman, yet in the natural it is as common as the rain. And it took no less than an apostle of some notoriety to unveil its secret:

"For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:31,32). The marriage of a man and a woman is, indeed, the greatest of mysteries, for it is, in reality, the unveiling of God's purpose unto humanity in this age the completion of THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST. Few who have repeated their vows and exchanged their rings have even the slightest sense of the immensity of their actions; yet the continuous repetition of that ceremony the world over, in every nation and every culture, gives perpetual testimony to the work and purpose of God in bringing humankind into oneness with Himself. Even the most unregenerate of men unwittingly bear testimony to the surety of God's word with the pronouncement, "I do." And while marriage may at best be a lifelong commitment to love, honor, and obey until death do we part for the average couple, it is for those of His calling nothing less than an open door to the heavenlies. It is among the most blessed opportunities that a man or woman will ever be afforded to ascend to the high realm of spirit and to enter in to the fullness of the reality of Christ which they so earnestly seek.

Here, in the union of a man and a woman, we see portrayed in the natural the higher spiritual marriage of Christ and the church, the sanctification of His most precious bride. The marriage relationship is the very exemplification of our own personal relationship with the Lord, the union of spirit by which we are begotten of Him and brought to the fullness of redemption. It is in the daily outworking of

love's commitment that we experience the subduing and overcoming of the carnal man by the inner man of spirit, until both spirit and soul are wed in blessed harmony, a new creation in Christ Jesus. It is upon the proving grounds of marriage that we become schooled in that elusive unconditional love of God until we become that very nature of love for all the world to behold. Here we shall surely encounter the beast, the serpent of old, and become skilled in the mastery and dominion of the spirit over that ancient adversary. We will learn of death and partake of its sting; and having died, we will know the reality and power of a resurrected life. We will know the laying down of our lives, the emptying of ourselves, the bearing of the cross, and the discovery of an entirely new life not our own. In the procreation of that one flesh shall we see the revelation of the man child, the manifestation of the Son, brought to the birth. We shall know the Father's heart, His tender mercies, His unending grace, His corrective judgments. The simple format of marriage is one of the most effective avenues to spiritual maturity, one of the highest forms of spiritual instruction and understanding of which a mortal may partake.

You may find yourself questioning just what manner of marriage could possibly enlist such depths of spiritual wonderment and merit so glowing a testimony. Such a marriage must indeed be a MYSTERY! The glad news that I must share with you is that EVERY marriage which is truly founded upon the covenant of death, the commitment to love, and the rock of our salvation, Christ Jesus, possesses the potential to plumb the depths of the riches of the glory of God. Our marriages, like so much of our lives, unfortunately, are largely lived out on the superficial plane of the natural man. Our understanding is all too often tainted by the thinking and philosophizing of the world and the acceptance of its precepts that we unwittingly settle for what could best be described as a "stunted" marriage relationship, one that aspires to nothing higher than the potential and fulfillment of the natural, soulish man. What is commonly said to be a "happy" marriage often amounts to little more than two people content that they are able to get along with one another while still retaining their sanity. But just as we must be renewed in the spirit of our minds if we are to perceive the realities of God and mature in our relationship with Jesus, so we must also be renewed in our perceptions concerning the relationship we have with our spouse if we are to reach beyond the mundane and see a happy marriage become a GLORIOUS marriage. It is to that end that this series of articles is devoted.

Of the various relationships we may encounter during life, those of friends, family, acquaintances, and brethren, none is more intimate, more personal, more demanding, more intruding upon our very being and constitution than the relationship we bind upon ourselves when we choose to take a spouse. The requirements of that singular relationship between a man and a woman will strike deep within the soul, dealing blow after blow to the ego until the carnal man is fully exposed, subdued, and laid to rest in his rightful grave. What better instrument to bring a man to the cross, to the destruction of the adamic nature, to the laying down of his life, than the invention of marriage? While marriage will certainly bring one to the death of one's self, it will just as surely lift those who give themselves to it into higher dimensions of life and love than they could have thought possible. Marriage is a deliberate, self imposed process of death

unto life. It is a calculated transformation wrought from the inside out through the instrumentation of love. It will, like no other means or method, effect the very work within us that God Himself has purposed to accomplish and that is to conform us to His nature.

It is a curious fact of life that God has established RELATIONSHIPS with our fellow human beings to be the instructor and perfecter of mankind. Being married is like having a private tutor. It is like having one's life and character placed under a microscope. It is the most intensive course in human relationship and personal mollification that one can undertake one on one, no holds barred. The married man or woman has willfully invited one other person to gain entrance into the very core of their life. They have given their mate the right to gaze into their soul as none but the Lord Himself may view them, to be known intimately, raw and uncut. The soul is laid bare before the eyes of our mate and we are frighteningly exposed; naked, as it were, to every fault and shortcoming, every habit and character trait, every attitude and desire, every motive and action. There is nowhere to hide from our spouse. Our mate is always there, scrutinizing our life on a daily basis. If this were merely a friendship or an acquaintance we could easily present our normal facade and no one would be the wiser. After all, what casual friend or acquaintance do we allow to tear so brutally at our life? But in marriage we have relinquished our right to privacy. Marriage, by its very nature, demands that our lives be invaded. And one who enters in with less than a true and open heart will sooner or later be found out. Marriage will make a man and woman honest, not only with their mate, but more importantly, with THEMSELVES. Marriage is a mirror. The married man or woman is confronted with their very own self in every encounter with their spouse. Quite often they do not like what they see. Being honest with one's self is one of the foremost requirements of a lasting marriage, and, unfortunately, one of the hardest things for the adamic man to do. We truly loathe being faced with who we really are.

It becomes obvious that there can be no separating our relationship and growth in the Lord from that with our spouse. One can hardly profess to be of any great spiritual stature if his marriage testifies to the contrary. The believer who desires to walk in the higher dimensions of the spirit may begin his walk without ever leaving home, for to be rightly related to one who is "bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh," is to be rightly related to One with Whom we are equally inseparable. One who seeks the intimacy of union with the Lord and conformation to His nature may begin by mastering the practical melding of two distinct lives which a love relationship demands. Those who desire to gain the high prize of Christ by the willing submission of their life unto death will find ample opportunity to do so through the covenant of marriage. There is nothing like marriage to bring us face to face with all the ingredients necessary for the outworking of our spiritual walk with Christ, and so it has been ordained. Find the man who has learned to be a husband according to the precepts of the kingdom of God, and likewise the woman who has learned to be a wife, and you will have found a corporate MAN who walks in close proximity to the nature of God. Adam himself was a relationship just waiting to happen. "And God created Adam (lit.) in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male

and female He created them" (Gen. 1:27). The mystery of this relationship begins with the fact that God created both male and female in one creature. God created THEM, and THEIR name was ADAM. Of all the living creatures which were brought before Adam, and to each of which he ascribed their distinct natures, none was found more like unto himself than that most glorious one which originated out of his own flesh. "And the Lord fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man" (Gen. 2:22). Adam found an instant and intuitive recognition in this woman, so much so that he proclaimed her to be "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." He saw in her his own unique mark of identity, a kinship familiar and compelling, for she was, indeed, his own body, his own flesh. Yet she was so radically different. Even though she was created in Adam, she was uniquely FASHIONED out of him. She was at once a being intimately a part of himself, and yet someone distinctly other than himself, unique in her formation, a different style of man entirely.

It is that same primal ecstasy that finds in us a deep sense of self recognition and that draws us inexorably to the one special person in whom we have found a depository for our love. It is as if we have found some long lost part of ourselves, an affinity that goes far deeper than personality or compatibility. And "For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh." This is an incomparable merger of two perfect strangers who find in each other a oneness, a unity of selves; for "neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord" (1 Cor. 11:11). A man cannot find his completeness, his wholeness, without the woman; neither can a woman find the full realization of her womanhood without the man. The two desperately need one another. And together they comprise the one complete man which God made in His very image and likeness.

The nature of this relationship between a husband and wife is sacred to such a degree that God instituted it by nothing less than a covenant. This is a union not to be taken lightly, for a husband and a wife are joined by something far greater than the exchanging of rings and vows and the signing of a marriage certificate. The marriage ceremony is merely the outward manifestation of the spiritual COVENANT to which they have given themselves. A covenant is uniquely the invention of God Himself. It is the most binding, immutable, and irrevocable compact that can be made; so binding, in fact, that it requires the death of those who enter into it. "For where a covenant is, there must of necessity be the death of the one who made it. For a covenant is valid ONLY when men are dead (lit. over the dead victims), for it is never in force while the one who made it lives" (Heb. 9:16 17). There is only one basis upon which God initiates a covenant and that is a SACRIFICE. A covenant requires the sacrificial death of those who enter therein. And once sealed by the shedding of blood, it represents final, irrevocable commitment.

Of the numerous covenants mentioned in the scriptural record, none is detailed more graphically than the New Covenant which became finalized by the death of Jesus. The Old Covenant, or testament of Law, by which no man could be made righteous, was done away and superseded by the covenant of grace by which men are reconciled to God, redeemed from the nature of sin, and delivered from the power of death. No man of Adam's race was capable of fulfilling all of

the law, much less of laying down his life for every man and taking it up again in power and glory. It would take a Lamb without blemish, in Whom was found no sin or unrighteousness, to be the sacrifice which would effectuate the work of conforming men to the nature of God; so God gave HIMSELF! The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world took upon Himself the form of man, divested Himself of the glory which He had in the Father before the world was, and willingly offered Himself in death in order that the Covenant of Life might be forever sealed. His death was required lest the covenant be held invalid. Had Jesus not shed His blood upon Calvary's cruel tree there would be no covenant, and therefore no redemption, no deliverance from the bondage of corruption, no transition from death unto life, no hope whatsoever for mankind beyond the drudging despair and death of this mortal existence. Thank God it is not so! The New Covenant has been ratified, forever made sure, absolute, and irrevocable by the death and resurrection of the Son of God. It can never be altered. It can never be nullified. Nothing can ever be added to it that it may be improved or taken from it that it may be lessened. It is God's highest and most sacred commitment to humanity that His work and purpose will be brought to completion. What God has spoken God has FINISHED! Such is the nature of a COVENANT.

Mankind required the death of Christ Jesus to make the covenant sure; and now, having secured reconciliation and life for all men, He requires ours. "And He was saying to them all, 'If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it'" (Luke 9:23, 24). Thus is stated one of the greatest and gravest paradoxes of the kingdom. Do you wish to follow Jesus? You may do so only at the cost of your life. The covenant requires it. Our relationship with Jesus is one of life unto death, and of death unto life. He requires that our soulish life, the life of the natural man so firmly entrenched in the adamic nature, be willingly submitted to death; for only in so doing will we find the true substance of life IN HIM. The man who loves not his soul unto death is the one who will find life. Contrarily, the man who so loves himself that he is unwilling to lay down his life in utter submission to the death of the cross, will never find life, for he has breached the terms of the covenant. For all his efforts at seeking to preserve his life, this man's end shall nevertheless be death. Live for Adam and you will lose it all; give Adam over to death, which is his rightful habitation (for he is, in fact, a dead man), and you will gain the age lasting prize of life in Christ. No truer a pronouncement of faith could be made than that by the apostle Paul; "I have been CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST; and it is no longer I who live, but CHRIST LIVES IN ME" (Gal. 2:20). That is the goal of every one who is called into covenant with Christ, for "YOU HAVE DIED and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, WHO IS OUR LIFE, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory" (Col. 2:3 4).

The covenant of marriage requires no less a commitment. We might again pose the question: Do you wish to take a spouse in marriage? You may do so only at the cost of your life! By virtue of the vows they exchange and the blood that is shed in the consummation of their union, a man and his wife covenant

together to live no longer for themselves, but for their spouse. The covenant requires that the man lay his life down for his wife; likewise is the woman required to submit her life in death to her husband. The binding precept established by God is unchanged, for they will find their new life together as one only inasmuch as each is willing to die to self and live for the other. In entering into marriage, a man and a woman each relinquish their individual right to live. They embark upon a journey that will again and again demand that they each die to their own desires, their own will, their own demands, in short, their own self life. And therein lies the single greatest challenge in the pursuit of a lasting marriage and its single greatest source of conflict. Adam, by nature, seeks to please himself. The principle of submission is entirely foreign to him. His brand of love is conditional and self centered. He cares nothing for death, only that he may live for himself. The husband and wife who launch headlong into the quest for a life together of love and bliss may find their journey very brief if they fail to recognize and understand this most fundamental requirement of their relationship; one must die FIRST in order to live. Nothing will more effectively destroy their relationship and withhold them from the greatest opportunity they will ever have to realize the blessed fullness of the high calling to life than the stubborn adherence to their SELF life. The burgeoning dockets of the divorce courts are fair testimony that he who seeks to preserve his life will lose it.

The couple, on the other hand, who love not their lives unto the death of the self nature, who have learned the art of submission, and who truly love their spouse enough to die for them, will find a veritable heaven on earth in the one life which the two have become. And the two become one only when both partakers of the covenant are dead. As it is in the spiritual, so it is in the natural. Marriage, then, is not so much a matter of "until death do we part," as it is "until death do we JOIN!"

"This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:32). The mystery of marriage goes a step beyond a mere analogy or type. In Ephesians 5:22 33 Paul outlines the Divine order established for the sanctification and perfection of the body of Christ. He does so by instructing husbands and wives how to become successfully related in their marriages! He begins with the wife; she is to be subject to her husband as unto the Lord. Why is the wife specifically instructed to be under submission to her husband "in everything," AS UNTO THE LORD? Because God has ordained that the husband is the HEAD of his wife just as Christ is the HEAD of the church. And just as the church is the BODY of the Christ, so is the wife the BODY of her husband. Now we all know that a head without a body is pretty useless. Apart from the body the head cannot perform in any practical manner at all. Neither is it possible for a body to function without its head. But a head and a body TOGETHER, in proper relationship to one another, comprise a WHOLE MAN and can accomplish anything. The position of headship in a marriage is given to the husband, just as Jesus holds the supreme place of authority over His body. As the church is under willing and loving submission to the authority of her head, Christ Jesus, so is it ordained that the wife be under submission to her head, her husband, in all things, AS UNTO THE LORD. God's divine order is that "Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ"

(1 Cor. 11:3). In submitting to her husband a wife places herself in alignment with God's prescribed order of authority, thus honoring both her husband and the Lord, and prospers in the blessing of a fruitful marriage.

It must be noted that the word "submission" in no way implies "inferior." Do you, as a member of Christ, consider yourself in some way "inferior" because you are a part of His body and not the head? Are you something less, or made weaker, because you have laid down your life in submission to His Lordship? Indeed not! We are, in fact, edified, honored, and blessed by the knowledge that we are, in a very literal sense, HIS BODY, the CHRIST of God, the very instrument and vehicle of His love, grace, and mercy in this world. As His body, we are nothing less in substance and nature than our Head. It is through our SUBMISSION unto Him that we are EXALTED to the stature of sonship in due season, placed in Christ, seated with Him in His throne, to rule and reign with Him. According to the thinking of the carnal man, submission is a posture of weakness; Adam considers a submissive man to be a wimp. As is usually the case, God's definition is exactly the opposite! There is a greatness of strength and power in the principle of submission that only the man of spirit can know. Submission is nothing less than the Lord's ordained prescription for exaltation and glory.

Even so, a wife is in no sense denigrated because she holds the position as the BODY of her husband. The simple truth is that he cannot function without her! Far from being inferior, she is the most essential and irreplaceable "body part" that he has. Husbands are instructed to love their wives "AS THEIR OWN BODIES." The husband who loves, cherishes, and nurtures his wife as his own body edifies her to a stature equal to his own, for the head and the body are ONE MAN. The body is no less a vital part of the whole man than is the head, it only holds a different functional position. The "excellent wife" praised by Solomon in Proverbs 31:10 31 is the wife who effectively fulfills her capacity as her husband's body.

Husbands are then enjoined to love their wives AS CHRIST LOVED THE CHURCH. And Christ's love for His body compelled Him to LAY DOWN HIS LIFE FOR HER. As Christ gave Himself up for His church, that He might sanctify her and present her before Himself holy, blameless, without spot or blemish, SO OUGHT HUSBANDS TO LOVE THEIR WIVES. The husband's position of headship and authority is in no way a license for tyranny or domination, for submission is also required of him. He is to submit his life unto his wife in death. He who truly loves his wife as his own body will not only nurture and cherish her, but sanctify her by willingly laying down his life that she might live. Christ died that we might live and be brought into the fullness of His nature and glory. A husband has no less a responsibility toward his wife. He is to quite literally love her to death; for in so doing he will raise her into newness of life, a life which she finds fulfilled in her husband, her head a life in which the two become one.

The mystery of marriage, like the mystery of Christ, is hidden to those lacking in its understanding. Those in whom He has invested His Life, however, are without excuse; for to us He has made known the mystery of His will (Eph. 1:9), and has revealed the depths of His truth so that we might know the things freely given to us by God (1 Cor. 2:10 12). A mystery is no longer mysterious

once its truth has been unveiled. We need not walk in ignorance of God's holy calling nor settle for second best. I trust you are persuaded, as I am, that it is needful to pursue the prize of the high calling of marriage as vigorously as we do the high calling of Christ. The two are indeed parallel in their objective. You only have your life to lose, and His Life to gain. No greater a possession could be bestowed upon man.

Part two of covenant and marriage

Getting married is simple. Staying married is work. It is ironic that the most life rending endeavor that a man and woman will ever undertake is something about which they know little, when in their blind bliss they say, "I do." They know that they love one another or at least believe they do and have committed themselves to each other for the remainder of their lives. Marriage will try them on both points, questioning them again and again as to whether they really mean it.

The love that was so unassailable during courtship, the commitment that was so unquestionable, soon begins to walk a thin line between "I do," and "I wish I hadn't." Only a brief period of married life is required before the ecstasy of falling in love makes way for the nitty gritty, day by day exercise of being in love. Life has not prepared them for the journey; indeed, it cannot. Marriage is an art that must be mastered through the trials and testings that only the institution of marriage itself is able to bestow. Unfortunately, all too many couples lack the knowledge and endurance necessary to nurture a deep, loving relationship that will remain immovable in the face of conflict or adversity. A steadfast and fruitful marriage does not just happen; like any other undertaking at which one seeks to become successful, a considerable commitment of time, study, and effort is required in order for one to become a husband or a wife. The exchanging of vows and rings is hardly the finished product; indeed, it is merely the beginning.

Marriage is the joining together of two totally separate and distinct individuals, each of whom brings with them a plethora of character traits, habits, idiosyncrasies, attitudes, expectations, and misconceptions that have subtly accumulated over the course of their lives. Each may have had very different upbringings and experiences which have formed their characters. When they were single, they became accustomed to living their lives pretty much as they pleased, following their own desires and charting their own courses. Marriage now demands that each willingly give up their life and lay it at the feet of their spouse. This radical departure from the comfort zone of self is precisely what love requires.

Courtship, unfortunately, rarely affords the opportunity to deal with such a difficult reality, for courtship is the arena of blind, reckless love. It is curious that the character traits which are so innocuous when this man and woman are "in love" prior to tying the knot, are destined to become the most glaring deficiencies in the eyes of the beholder only a short while after the wedding bells

have ceased. The love of courtship may be blind, but love has a way of quickly regaining its vision in a very acute manner.

The courting couple inherently practices that pure, innocent, unpretentious love that is so willing to overlook a fault, forgive an offense, see only the best, and serve with undying devotion in order to win that special man or woman. Would they only know it, that is precisely the manner of love they will need once they have regained their "vision," and this adoring apple of their eye becomes their pain in the neck! Love is so very deceiving. So charming on the exterior. So cold and calculating underneath. So demanding when stripped of its tinsel. We are enticed by its ecstasy and grandeur only to discover that this elusive love which we so eagerly sought has become an onerous trap. Love lures us into its sublime chamber and then slams the door behind us. Suddenly, that which brought us into throes of rapture now brings us to our knees. To this the loving couple has unwittingly committed themselves, unaware that love is required to be proven.

Love, like faith, is worth little in its superficial form. Both must be tried as by fire in order to be refined and matured before either may be truly possessed. Paul's insight concerning the trial of our faith may just as surely be echoed in regard to love: "Even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the **PROOF OF YOUR FAITH**, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:6,7). Faith, like love, is the gift of God. But neither is given without the intention of being established as an integral part of our very nature, unshakable and immovable.

Faith in its infantile state is the ability to believe. But once matured through the pressures of testing and experience it becomes far more than simple belief; it becomes incontrovertible knowledge. Faith is **KNOWING** that you **KNOW**. It is the substance of absolute assurance. It cannot be dissuaded by contrary opinion or circumstance. That kind of faith is established in us only through time and experience. There once was a time when you believed that God was sovereign. Your church doctrine may have taught you to so believe. That belief, however, remained only an abstract persuasion until God brought hardship and adversity into your life. Only after experiencing the sovereignty of God firsthand did you come to **KNOW** with **ABSOLUTE ASSURANCE** that God works all things after the counsel of His own will, and that He does indeed cause all things to work together into good. Once God has demonstrated His sovereignty in your life, you no longer merely believe God to be sovereign, you **KNOW IT!** It is no longer a mere doctrine of theology, it is **REALITY**. You would no more question God's sovereignty than you would your own name. God gives to each one the measure of faith then sets about **PROVING** that faith until it becomes part of our very nature. Only then do we truly **POSSESS** faith, for we can only possess that which we have come to know by experience.

The love that God would perfect in us through the instrument of marriage carries the same requirement. As human beings formed after the carnal nature of the first Adam, we tend to love on a superficial plane. Yet having been made in the image and likeness of God, we are entirely capable of possessing and

exercising the higher, spiritual form of love which God is. It hardly comes naturally. It must be nurtured and matured within us in the same manner as is faith, through the proof of experience. We find, therefore, that the giddy, glamorous, head over heels "love" with which we betroth a spouse soon comes down to earth and takes up residence at the breakfast table, the bathroom, the bedroom, the Laundromat, the grocery store, and at a thousand other locations where it is least invited. Day after day, in every imaginable situation and circumstance, love will confront us, challenging us to walk in its precepts. Stripped of its romantic veil, love often leaves us with nothing but the cold, practical outworking of two interwoven lives. Conflicts and disagreements arise. Kindness and caring give way to trampling each other's preferences underfoot. Misunderstandings and misconceptions take root. Emotions engage in pitched battles of self willed dominance. Those innocuous little character traits that were once overlooked now loom as the most despicable of faults. We may even begin to wonder why in the world we ever thought to marry this horrid stranger in the first place. Welcome to the proving grounds of love!

The married couple has committed themselves to LOVE; not only in the sense that they must love one another, but to the supreme entity of love itself. Love is not merely a romantic feeling of kindness, caring, and affection for someone; it is the decision one has made in committing themselves to the quality of life they desire, and which only marriage can bring. Love is the instructor, the headmaster of the married couple's relationship. Under its tutorage they will be proven, refined, and strengthened by every confrontation and emotional wrenching they encounter. And just as faith is purified and established, immovable, by the storms of adversity, so will their love become steadfast and unquestionable. The husband and wife who POSSESS love, who KNOW its blessed reality, have gained it through the pressures, the hurts, the conflicts, and the rending that only marriage affords.

The husband and wife who are thus confronted with the raw reality of this ordeal called "love" will benefit greatly if they learn to view their instruction objectively. They must realize that there is PURPOSE in the conflicts which arise between them. They have entered into covenant commitment, and have decreed love to be both the foundation and goal of their covenant. God will now hold them to it, and see that their high calling is realized. The turmoil they may encounter is not intended to destroy their marriage, but to strengthen it. Every "battle" they confront is yet another opportunity to love GOD'S WAY; to practice submission and forgiveness, to be patient and kind, to seek understanding and tolerance, to die a bit more to self. The covenant commitment by which the two are joined precludes blaming one another for their marital strife. A husband and wife are partners, not enemies. When they can work through their hardships hand in hand, considering each one a challenge for growth rather than a problem for which the other is to be blamed, they will have attained an immeasurable stature on the road to a lasting, loving relationship.

Despite appearances to the contrary, the challenge to love is not a battle with our spouse as we may be quick to assume; it is, in reality, a battle with SELF. It has been rightly said that the opposite of love is not hate it is SELF! The self nature is the greatest destroyer of love. Constantly demanding its way. Sullen

and resentful when it is thwarted. Always wanting but seldom giving, and then only begrudgingly. Always blaming while being careful never to forgive. Offending recklessly without offer of apology or plea for pardon. Forever justifying itself, however irrational may be its premise. Quick to observe the faults of others without ever recognizing its own. Offended at the slightest infraction and never forgetting a wrong incurred. Vengeful and vindictive. Proud and protective. Jealous and spiteful. Manipulative and deceitful. This is the stuff of which we are made, the "attributes" we demonstrate when we walk in the nature of the first Adam. The husband or wife who find themselves mired in marital conflict would do well to seek the source of their distress by first looking in the mirror! Inasmuch as SELF seeks dominance, from thence will the chaos arise. "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For FROM WITHIN, OUT OF THE HEART OF MAN, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. All these evil things PROCEED FROM WITHIN and defile the man" (Mark 7:20-23). If indeed we have a satan, an adversary, it is none but the self centered nature resident within.

SELF even sports its own brand of love. And, true to form, it is motivated out of pure SELF and seeks only to gratify SELF. The self nature sets conditions and requirements on the love it so graciously dispenses. SELF says, "I love you BECAUSE..." (fill in whatever self gratifying quality may strike your fancy); or, "I will love you IF..." (enter whatever condition may please you); or, "I will love you UNTIL..." (the possibilities for this one are endless!). What SELF is really saying is that it will love as long as the other person meets its conditions. Once the conditions are no longer met and SELF ceases to find gratification, it will fall "out of love" as quickly as it fell in. Love of this nature is not love at all; it is a sham and a fraud, shallow and immature. In reality, SELF loves no one but SELF. SELF loves only for its own benefit, giving only when there is something to be gained. SELF'S eternal motto is, "What's in it for ME?" SELF wants a relationship, but only on its own terms. The selfish nature will seek to conform another to its own image and likeness. When it is unable to do so, it will justify dispensing with that spouse on grounds of "incompatibility" and seek another more to its liking.

Consider the alternative true, genuine love the love which proceeds from the heart of God. What if God loved us BECAUSE we were in any way deserving of His love? Would He then love you, perhaps, less than another who had more admirable qualities? What if He loved us IF we met certain conditions and requirements? Would not His grace then be abrogated and no man be found worthy of His love? What if He loved us UNTIL we became unworthy in His sight or displeasing to Him? There would then surely be an eternal hell! Thank God His love knows no such constraints!

Genuine love is without conditions, without requirements. It is not tainted by any bias, prejudice, or preference. It cannot be nullified by any failure, shortcoming, or betrayal. It is immutable. It cannot be changed, altered, or lessened by what we may do or not do. It continues to love, unabated, even when it is not loved in return. Genuine love says, "I love you...PERIOD!" No "ifs",

"ands", or "buts." This is love in its truest sense, in its highest form. It is the very form of love that God will have wrought in us by His Spirit. His love will be nurtured, proven, and perfected until it becomes our very NATURE, for He has predestined us to be conformed to the image of the Son (Rom. 8:29). And marriage is the crucible of love. No greater opportunity could be set before man than to learn the love of God through relationship with a spouse. If we fail in the arena of marriage, where we must learn to truly love just one other person, how shall we succeed in demonstrating the love of God to a world sold under the slavery of bondage and corruption?

Genuine love is entirely selfless. It seeks not what it may gain, but what it may give; and it gives with no thought of what it may receive in return. It seeks not to gratify itself, but to bless and edify another. It desires not to be served, but rather to meet the need of the one who is the object of its love. It is willing to give in, to submit to another, rather than to hold unrelentingly to its own demands. Genuine love is not offended when wronged, intentionally or otherwise. It bears no grudge, but forgives every offense. It harbors no vengeance when dealt an injustice. Love extols only the best in another, seeking to uplift, encourage and strengthen. Love does not seek its own justification, nor does it point the finger of guilt. Love has no pride. It is quick to admit an error and seek forgiveness with a heart of humility. Love is able to bear every pressure, emerge from every trial unscathed, stand steadfast in the face of adversity, and look calamity in the eye with knowing assurance. Love never fails.

Genuine, matrimonial love can only be founded and practiced on one basis the unrelenting COMMITMENT of each spouse to the other. This love is not earned by merit; it is GIVEN BY CHOICE. A man chooses to take a woman as his wife; in so doing, he commits his life to her, and commits himself to love FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE. Likewise does the woman who chooses to take a husband. This man and this woman have made a DECISION TO LOVE, and have sealed that decision with an irrevocable covenant. THAT and THAT ALONE is the foundation of matrimonial love. A husband and wife who never lose sight of that commitment, and who have learned to consistently act out of their decision to love, are likely to reap the bounty of a fruitful, blessed relationship.

This is the very essence of agape love the love which God extends toward His creation. God loves us because He CHOOSES to love us. We have done nothing to earn His love or merit His grace. Every man of Adam's race is sold under sin, estranged from God. The scriptural record clearly states, "There is NONE righteous, NOT EVEN ONE. There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE" (Rom. 3:10, 12). Who, then, is deserving of God's love and redemption? NO ONE! Yet, God SO LOVED the world that HE GAVE His only begotten Son as the sacrifice of redemption for all men. Why would God do such a thing? Because He has COMMITTED Himself to the redemption of the creation! God "WILLS THAT ALL MEN SHOULD BE SAVED and come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:3,4). Thus, His command has gone forth into the creation, "Look unto Me, AND BE YE SAVED, ALL THE ENDS OF THE EARTH: for I am God, and there is none else. I HAVE SWORN BY MYSELF, the word is gone out of My mouth in righteousness, and shall not return, THAT

UNTO ME EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW, EVERY TONGUE SHALL SWEAR" (Isa. 45:22,23). God's unalterable COMMITMENT to mankind is THAT THEY SHALL ALL BE SAVED! God not only WILLS it He COMMANDS IT! He has sworn it by an oath and decreed it by His word. His love toward men, therefore, is freely given without any reservations, conditions, or requirements. His love flows from the throne of grace with no strings attached. He has CHOSEN TO LOVE because He has COMMITTED HIMSELF TO LOVE. There is no escaping God's love. You WILL be loved by Him. You WILL be saved because of His love. That is His COMMITMENT to you! The sole foundation of God's unconditional love is His commitment toward fulfilling His word. What God has spoken, God will perform. That is also the foundation of unconditional love between a husband and wife fulfilling the covenant commitment of their marriage. And THAT IS AGAPE LOVE!

Beware the emotions! Feelings, more than any other factor, will cast a shroud of darkness over the commitment to love. The emotions are a faculty of the soul, an integral part of the self nature. They are extremely powerful advocates of the Adamic man; a force to be reckoned with in every marriage. Nothing can more quickly disrupt the harmony of love in a relationship than the sour strands of emotional lament. When a person thinks and acts out of the emotions, they effectively bind love in a straitjacket. Love becomes buried beneath the dung heap of resentment, anger, and frustration, which in turn opens a Pandora's box of related soulish vices. Allowed to go unchecked, negative emotions can chart a marriage down the road to ruin. Emotions can build mountains out of mole hills. They can "think" problems into being that do not even exist. They can convince the mind to accept perceptions as truth; perceptions which may, in fact, have no basis in reality. They can destroy a person with discouragement, despair, and depression. Let's pay a visit to the typical married couple caught in just such a snare.

Mr. and Mrs. Happily Ever After have a blowout over one of the many short fuses likely to invade their relationship. After a "spirited discussion," both go away angry, each blaming the other as the cause of the problem. Hurt and distraught, they spend the next several days licking their wounds, conjuring resentment toward their spouse. Each feels offended, indignant at the other's inconsideration. They mull the incident over and over in their minds, recounting every past offense, mortaring new bricks in the wall they are building between them. Now the ball is rolling. Enter PRIDE the front line warrior of the SELF. Pride refuses to entertain the possibility that I may be at fault. "My fault?" screams pride. "Hardly! If it wasn't for what he/she did in the first place I wouldn't FEEL this way." Pride must firmly affix blame while always justifying its own actions. Our unwitting couple is acting (and reacting) on how they FEEL, and at the moment love is not on the list. They feel angry. They feel hurt. They feel offended. They feel resentful. They each feel they are right, and that they are justified in feeling that way. And they are going to stay mad, by golly, because it FEELS GOOD! Mr. and Mrs. Not So Happily Ever After have dragged their commitment to love into the war zone of the emotions, from which there is no victor. Little do they realize that this repetitive cycle is nothing but a death trap. They have given themselves over to the darkness and destruction of SELF,

plunging their relationship into the realm of death. Left unresolved (that is, unforgiven), such offenses can leave permanent wounds that will fester and rot through their relationship like a cancer. A marriage driven by the emotional demands of the soul is a marriage in chaos. It is a marriage tossed to and fro by every change of the emotional barometer. To be sound and prosperous, a marriage must have a more steadfast anchor; one that cannot be ripped up and dragged about during the course of the storm.

Genuine love is that immovable anchor. While feelings can easily be "in love" one day and "out of love" the next, genuine love is not swayed by any emotional discontent. Its performance is not measured by how it "feels," for genuine love is not a feeling it is a DECISION. Genuine love is not necessarily what you feel, but WHAT YOU DO. It is love motivated out of commitment the decision one makes to love in spite of feelings to the contrary.

Certainly no one would disagree that it feels good to love. One cannot help but be warmed by the sense of happiness, joy, contentment, and fulfillment that surrounds a heart of love. A moment's thought will also make evident the fact that love's greatest pleasure is in its GIVING rather than in its receiving. It feels good to know that you are loved. It feels so much better to be the one DOING the loving! It is a truth that loves begets love; what you give, you shall also receive. You cannot put love into action without getting love in return. If you want to feel the love grow in your relationship, the key is to put love into action. ACT out of love, and you will not be able to quench the loving feelings that accompany, and reward, your actions. For of a truth, it is not the feelings that beget the love; IT IS THE LOVE WHICH BEGETS THE FEELINGS. (Selah!) When one becomes a doer of the word, giving demonstration to their love, the loving feelings cannot help but follow and be reciprocated.

Every marriage will have its turn at emotional upheaval. And every such conflict can actually be used for profit, to undergird and strengthen a relationship. Negative emotions arise from the soul; they are a pure reaction of SELF to a given situation. They are, in effect, warning signals that SELF is asserting itself, usurping love's rightful place in the relationship.

Let's suppose you are driving your car down the interstate and one of those red dummy lights on the instrument panel starts to blink on and off. The light reads, "Service Engine." Initially, you may be a bit alarmed, but your apprehension is relieved when the light finally blinks off. "Probably nothing to worry about," you say to yourself, and continue down the road. "Maybe just a bad connection." Soon the light begins to flutter once again, only this time it stays on, glowing brighter than ever. "Darn light!" you mutter, and tap the troublesome thing with your finger in an effort to rid yourself of its red glare. The symptom persists. "But the engine sounds perfectly fine," you reason. "Next chance I get to pull over, I'll just get under the dash and yank the wire off the stupid thing. That'll fix it." The only problem is, before you get a chance to pull over, the engine has overheated, burned several valves, fried the bearings, and given up the ghost for good! No one would be so foolish as to ignore a warning light that is put there to indicate a mechanical problem with their car. Given prompt attention, a minor problem does not get the chance to grow into a major disaster.

Yet husbands and wives often do not perceive the warning lights of marital unrest that can lead to the disaster of a blown relationship. Emotions of anger, frustration, and resentment are warning signals that the "love machine" is in need of servicing. Negative emotions point directly to a problem not with your spouse but with YOU. Each of us must take responsibility for our own emotional states. It is so easy to blame our spouse for our anger and unhappiness, that we fail to realize that if "I" am angry, it is because I AM ANGRY. If "I" am frustrated, it is because I AM FRUSTRATED. If "I" harbor resentment against my spouse, it is because I AM RESENTFUL. My spouse is not to blame for my emotional state, even though it was something he/she said or did that gave rise to my negative feelings. Those feelings merely serve to amplify my responsibility to ACT IN LOVE. Situations that evoke emotional trauma are prime opportunities to consciously make the DECISION TO LOVE. Once that decision is made and acted upon, negative, self centered emotions become completely disempowered. When love becomes a habit for a husband and wife, rather than a last resort, BEING in love will soon become the reality of their marriage.

No doubt, we have all heard our share of divorce sagas. It is unfortunate that men and women will give their lives and focus the full force of their energy on the pursuit of a career, financial security, having a nice home, a new car, and all the things associated with earthly happiness, yet devote so little time and effort to cultivating the most blessed and divine gift two people can share the gift of love. To possess that sublime nature of Godliness in the context of marriage, however, is one of life's most arduous undertakings, and certainly its most rewarding. Those who seek the knowledge, wisdom, and grace necessary for its attainment, and who stand unrelentingly upon their commitment, shall reap the highest fulfillment that can be known among men upon this earthly plane, and shall know also the reality of the high calling in Christ Jesus to which they aspire; for the two shall become one.

Part Three of Covenant and marriage

If we are to believe the television sitcoms, the psychologists and marriage counselors, the gossip tabloids, and the general consensus of modern society, we would be forced to conclude that a thriving, fulfilling marriage is something of an anomaly an oddity reserved for only the rarest of couples. In a society where humanism, feminism, and liberalism are politically correct, where divorce is quick and routine, where "alternate lifestyles" and "situation ethics" are taught to school children, the idea of marital commitment seems as old-fashioned as the horse and buggy. A non marriage relationship between a man and woman, or between a homosexual couple for that matter, is considered as valid as anything legal and binding. The "unwed teenage mother" is now so commonplace that our high schools build day care centers to accommodate the children so mom can complete her education. The dysfunctional TV sitcom family living "Unhappily Ever After" is the media role model we are expected to find amusing. Our society

is indulged with the notion that a truly wonderful marriage is something found only in romance novels and Disney classics.

We, that is, society as a whole, have only perpetuated the myth that marriage is an existence of drudgery because we have believed the disparaging images constantly being fed to us. We have come to accept that a happy, thriving marriage is unrealistic for the average couple. Marriage without romance beyond the "honeymoon" phase is considered normal. Marriage, we are sure, will never really deliver on the level of love and fulfillment that we would like it to. Since we inevitably fulfill the things we believe, we tacitly resign ourselves to a mediocre relationship without much of a squabble. By doing so, we further reinforce our belief that marriage is just as we thought it would be arduous and unrewarding. And so it is.

Whatever we believe, whether that belief is positive or negative, true or false, will influence our lives to a great degree. Many of our beliefs are subconscious in nature. They may have been formed by the circumstances and experiences of our youth, and are carried over into adulthood. They often go unrecognized and undefined, for they have become a part of our character, our psychological makeup. Beliefs shape our attitudes, our motives, and thus, our behavior. Beliefs represent decisions. A person who is convinced they will never succeed, never will. They have already made the subconscious decision that they are destined to fail. Not surprisingly, they encounter failure, which in turn only serves to reinforce their belief. Contrarily, one who believes they can accomplish anything they set their mind on doing is likely to reap the reward of their efforts. Failure is not defeat, only a stepping stone along the path to accomplishment.

Our beliefs concerning marriage, and our own relationships in particular, cannot help but influence the quality of our experience. A couple entering into matrimony with the age old notion that fifty percent of all marriages are destined to fail will certainly have much less chance of a successful marriage than the couple who believes that their marriage can be strong and thriving, and are committed to making it so. The spouse who views marriage as a "ball and chain" is likely to make it just that. Those who embrace their covenant as a partnership of love will not be dismayed by the challenges it affords.

Your "odds" of having a thriving, long lived marriage are, in fact, exactly what you make them, based on what you believe about your marriage, and whether or not you choose to be a loving, proactive spouse. There are three distinct qualities that separate those who truly have great marriages from those who do not: Desire, Belief, and Commitment. Couples who thrive desire to be extremely happy together; they believe in their marriage and in each other, and in their ability to have a fulfilling relationship; and they have committed themselves to making it a reality. Their thoughts, attitudes, and actions are effected out of a positive, constructive foundation upon which their relationship can be built.

Just as Faith, Hope, and Love form the core of our relationship with our Father, and provide the matrix for the outworking of that relationship, so do their counterparts, Desire, Belief, and Commitment, serve the same purpose in the realm of matrimony. Without them, a successful marriage is at best a matter of pure luck. Where Desire, Belief, and Commitment prevail, the conflicts and

adversities encountered along the road of life will only strengthen and solidify a husband and wife, bringing them into a more perfect union. Where these traits are conspicuously absent, the same trials will invariably bring their marriage to destruction.

While many factors may contribute to the quality of a relationship, perhaps the single greatest cause of unhappy and failed marriages is an underlying attitude of ambivalence on the part of one or both partners. The double minded man is unstable in all of his ways; the ambivalent husband or wife suffers the same catastrophe. Ambivalence renders genuine love impotent. As we shall see, ambivalence in a relationship makes real commitment all but impossible. It effectively compromises the desire one may have for a solid, thriving marriage. It inhibits the positive belief and trust so necessary to realizing true union between a husband and wife. It is one of the great, unseen saboteurs of marriages.

Ambivalence, by definition, is the quality of wanting something, yet at the same time, not wanting it; being simultaneously attracted to and repulsed from a person, place, or thing. It is marked by indecisiveness, instability, and noncommittal. The ambivalent person may genuinely want a lasting, fulfilling relationship, but subconsciously they are fearful of being overwhelmed and engulfed by that relationship. They may desire to love and be loved, but are unable to give themselves to the unreserved commitment that genuine love requires. They are likely to find their expectations of love muted by frustration and disappointment.

The result is a relationship "at arm's length." The spouse plagued by ambivalence goes through marriage with the brakes on. To cast themselves wholly and without reservation into a marriage, they fear, would mean losing their freedom, their independence, their sense of control. Ambivalence erects barriers spawned by deep rooted insecurities and fears which may not even be recognized, let alone confronted. Unable to fully love, trust, and commit for fear of being hurt and betrayed, ambivalence keeps one foot out the door. There must always be a way out if things "don't work." Ironically, as long as one holds to their posture of noncommittal, things never will.

Ambivalence never makes a final decision. It continually lives in the shadow of a doubt. "Did I marry the right person? Do I really love being in this relationship? What if this was a mistake? Is this worth it?" The truly committed couple has no need to entertain such questions, for they already have the answer. Their solid foundation of Desire, Belief, and Commitment toward their spouse and their marriage leaves no room for oscillation.

Not so the ambivalent couple. The lack of total commitment perpetuates a vicious cycle. The nagging doubts, hesitations, and fears breed stress and conflicts in the marriage, which in turn lessen any likelihood of real commitment. It isn't long before "problems" seem to materialize out of nowhere, born out of a deep sense of discontent. Unaware of the root cause, the ambivalent couple blame each other as the source of their woes.

"If you weren't so..." "Why can't you be more..." "Why must you always..." "You never..." "I just hate it when you..." Accusation and criticism abound in the mind of someone seeking to justify their own deficiencies. Guilt must be cast upon

another. The dominant attitude is, "I'm miserable, and it's all your fault!" Molehills become immovable mountains. Character quirks in their spouse become despicable faults. Missteps are seen as flagrant offenses, and even good intentions may be misconstrued as efforts to control and dominate. The spouse under siege can feel forced into a "damned if I do and damned if I don't" predicament. Love becomes mere tolerance.

An attitude of ambivalence can turn a potentially prosperous marriage into a war zone, seething with conflict and tension. Let's say that Esther's husband, Raul, does not meet her approval in the way he manages the family's finances (or any of a number of other complaints she may have). He likes to spend money rather carelessly, and frequently on his own interests. The bills get paid, but the credit cards just keep growing. Esther makes it a sticking point in their marriage. Raul is repeatedly berated for his spendthrift behavior and condemned at every opportunity for being undisciplined and irresponsible.

The underlying cause of Esther's discontent may very well be an ambivalent attitude rooted deep within her psychological makeup. Her "attack mode" is, in reality, a defense mechanism she employs to shield her from facing her own fears and insecurities. Her commitment to the marriage is being held hostage. She is unable to love unconditionally and to be accepting of Raul's shortcomings. She is disappointed and frustrated in their relationship, and may even be convinced that their marriage was a mistake. To add reinforcement to her belief, she is likely to find fault in everything Raul does from spending his paycheck to squeezing the toothpaste from the middle of the tube.

Esther may certainly be right in her analysis of her husband's spending habits, but she also pays a big price for clinging to her analysis. She gets to be right, but she doesn't get to be loving. She doesn't get to be forgiving. She doesn't get to be submissive. She doesn't get to be patient and understanding. She doesn't get to watch the corrective hand of God in her husband's life, and she doesn't get to use the opportunity to grow in the life of Christ, simply because she refuses to relinquish her judgmental attitude. Esther gets the booby prize!

Being right, however, does serve a purpose for Esther. It keeps her safe. As long as she is right she won't have to risk the possibility of making any changes in her own attitudes or behavior. She won't have to acknowledge her own responsibility for perpetuating the problems in her marriage, or in becoming part of the solution. As far as she is concerned, her husband is at fault. Her life would be much happier, she is sure, if only he would change. Little does she realize that her unloving attitude precludes that possibility. Raul is not likely to respond in a positive manner to her accusation and criticism. He may only become all the more hardened toward his nagging spouse. Esther's approach only perpetuates the problem, and she becomes increasingly frustrated as the issue goes unresolved.

So what if Esther is right? Love is not a matter of being right; it is a matter of acting right. An attitude of love and submission would go a long way in relieving the stress and tension being generated in the relationship, and it would free Raul to respond positively toward changing his errant behavior. A submissive posture would align Esther with God's ordained order of authority in

the marriage, thus allowing God to deal with Raul, rather than Esther attempting to change him with her judgmental tongue. She would also find herself freed from the burden of anger and resentment that she has heaped upon herself. It is not Esther's responsibility to make her husband change; it is her responsibility to act toward him in love, forgiveness, and submission.

The couple who has solidified their commitment to each other carry a somewhat different perspective. Unreserved commitment, and the genuine love it begets, allows them to accept each other in spite of their respective shortcomings, thus providing a nonjudgmental atmosphere in which change can be effected. Not only are they free to ask for change in their spouse, but also free to accept those things which they cannot change. Genuine love and commitment accepts a person just as they are, warts and all. When we learn to be accepting and tolerant of the things we cannot change, they cease to be problems. To be critical and condemning of those things is to actually create a problem.

The bond of intimacy becomes another casualty in the domino effect spawned by ambivalence. True intimacy requires the liberty to be vulnerable, balanced by the security of absolute trust. A husband and wife must rest in the assurance that the baring of their souls will be met with love, support, and understanding. Such a forum is nonexistent in the absence of unwavering commitment. How could a couple entrust each other with their innermost secrets, fears, and failings if their bond of commitment itself was in jeopardy? To do so could very well mean the end of their relationship altogether. They can never become invested in each other's lives until having spanned the chasm of doubt, hesitation, and fear. Only unreserved commitment can provide the safe haven where true union can be nurtured. Love, indeed, casts out all fear.

How is one to deal with such an enigma? How does one turn the quicksand of ambivalence into the solid bedrock of whole hearted commitment? Recognition is the first key. The spouse who is beset by nagging doubts, fears, and uncertainties over the fundamental rightness of the relationship can be fairly certain that commitment has yet to be established. The spouse who asks, "Did I marry the right person?" obviously has yet to believe that they did. The husband or wife who is holding their options open just in case things don't work has not yet committed to being a husband or a wife. The willingness to confront the specter of ambivalence, and deal with it constructively, is the door to freedom.

So what if I'm not absolutely committed to my spouse, but I want to be? What if I cannot now love unconditionally, but I really want to? The be thou a DOER OF THE WORD! The words once spoken to me by a dear friend and brother in Christ bear repeating: You can ACT your way into thinking, but you will never THINK your way into acting. If you want to be wholly committed to your spouse, then ACT LIKE IT. If you want to truly love your spouse, and be loved in return, then ACT IN LOVE toward your spouse. If you want an enthusiastic marriage, then become an enthusiastic partner! Find some small way every day to demonstrate your love and commitment. Of course, this will require that you suspend the deeply entrenched attitudes that have for so long characterized your mind set. You may have to relinquish the negative feelings that have been allowed to accumulate, subdue the self serving judgmentalism, and surrender

your posture of "rightness" in order to consciously change your behavior. In short, you will have to DIE TO SELF, which is precisely what true love and commitment requires!

I am not suggesting that you deny your ambivalence only that you make the conscious decision to act in spite of it. Your feelings are real; but there is no need to allow them to govern your life. Doing so will only make you and everyone around you miserable. You have the power to choose to think and believe differently. You have the power to choose to act in love regardless of your feelings. You have the power to change your attitudes, your beliefs, and your behavior, if you so choose. Quite often, changing your behavior will precipitate a change in your feelings, and you may find yourself believing that you (yes, YOU!) actually can have the enthusiastic, satisfying relationship that you desire. Never compromise the opportunity to love with the excuse, "But I don't feel like it." Love is not what you feel; LOVE IS WHAT YOU DO! By consciously making an "attitude adjustment" and acting in love in a given situation, you will find your former negative, destructive feelings completely disempowered. You may just end up acting your way right out of your ambivalence!

Absolute commitment brings a revolutionary change in the quality of a marriage. A liberating shift takes place in the energy of both partners, and in the perspective with which they view their relationship. "I do" is no longer up for grabs. Commitment settles the matter. Now the couple can give themselves wholly and constructively to nurturing their relationship. No longer are they driving with the brakes on. Commitment lays the foundation for unconditional love, acceptance, and goodwill. And not surprisingly, once commitment is affirmed, many of the "problems" in the marriage cease to exist.

What two people commit themselves to is a journey; a journey of discovery, a journey of challenge and opportunity. The journey is not always easy, and not without obstacles encountered along the way. Commitment does not mean that things will never change; it means that love shall remain steadfast throughout the process of change to which the couple has committed themselves. Marriage is a smelter. Out of its refining fire is love made pure; and out of the crucible of love do the two become one. Commitment is willing to go the distance, endure the heat, and embrace the difficulties with the certainty that love will emerge victorious.

It has been stated that nothing in life that has any value can be achieved without absolute commitment. In the words of the Biblical record, "Therefore, gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and fix your hope completely on the grace being brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 1:13). In other words, put the procreative power at your disposal to constructive use, be prudent and calculating in your endeavor, and never lose sight of your objective. The husband and wife who give heed to such wisdom will surely find they have a marriage made in the heavenlies.