

SEX, LOVE & MARRIAGE

Zac Poonen

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For further details, please contact:

*Christian Fellowship Church
40, DaCosta Square ,
Wheeler Road Extension,
Bangalore-560084,
India.*

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PREFACE

Sex, love and marriage! What vital subjects! None can remain unaffected by them. And yet what ignorance prevails about the real purpose of these gifts of God to mankind.

In our country, instruction on these matters is usually not given either by parents to their children or by pastors to their young people. As a result, young people obtain their information in perverted forms from the "gutter". The world and the Devil are quick to teach them in their own way what the church should have taught them first in a pure way. Ignorance about the Scriptural teaching on these subjects has left most young people defenseless against Satan's subtle attacks in these realms. This book is an attempt to cater to this need. It seeks to look at sex, love and marriage from God's viewpoint.

God Himself is the essence of true love and He is the One Who created sex and ordained marriage. He alone can therefore tell us what love really means, and how sex and marriage can be used for our greatest good. What God has said in His Word, we shall find is contrary to much that this world teaches on these subjects. But the teaching of God's Word is like a rock. He who builds his life on it can never fall - no storm or earthquake will ever shake him.

There are some matters on which one cannot be dogmatic: in these I have refrained from dogmatism. But there are other matters on which one cannot but be firm. On such matters I have tried to express myself unequivocally.

I have done some plain speaking in this book which may shock the prudes! There are some strong statements too. Most evangelical Christians in India, I fear, have soft-pedaled these issues for too long. Many a young life might have been saved from ruin if Christian leaders had spoken with a firmer voice on these matters. Hence I make no apology for hitting hard in some places. I have seen many Christians falling into Satan's traps in the realm of sex. I have also seen many "Christian" marriages that have fulfilled the devil's purpose instead of God's. I cannot but open fire now with the deadliest weapons in the armoury.

Chapter Six, "FOR GIRLS ONLY", has been kindly contributed by my wife.

I would urge young people to read through this book seriously. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. Prevention is better than cure. Taking heed to what is said herein may save you from many a heartache and many a shipwreck in the future.

In many places where I have used the pronouns, "he" and "him", they do not refer only to men. I have used these words in a generic way to refer to mankind in general - and so women are included too. The places where this is so will be obvious to the reader.

I am indebted to a number of believers who read through the original manuscript and offered helpful comments.

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It is my prayer that this book will be a blessing to many in helping them to find God's perfect will in sex, love and marriage.

Zac Poonen

CHAPTER ONE

DYNAMITE - HANDLE WITH CARE!

The most powerful of created instincts, sex, is indeed like dynamite! What potential for blessing there is in this wonderful gift of God and yet what havoc has been wrought by its abuse.

In every man and woman there exists sex instincts and wants. These instincts may not be of the same strength in all, but they do constitute a powerful force in all normal human beings for at least thirty years after adolescence. Like dynamite, sex can be used for good and for evil - for the glory of God or for the service of the devil. There is nothing inherently sinful in dynamite, it all depends on how and for what purpose it is used: so with sex. If accepted as God's gift and used wisely under God's control, it can be the means of man's highest fulfilment. If misused, it can lead him down to the lowest depths of degradation. It is indeed, as one has said, "a wonderful servant but a terrible master."

Sexual desire is as normal as the desire for food and for rest. But the God Who created these desires has also ordained the means for their legitimate satisfaction.

Perverted views

Sex, as created by God, is sacred and pure. This is evident from the fact that it was created before man fell into sin and existed in a world which God Himself considered "Very Good". But ever since the Fall of man, his view of sex has been perverted and he himself has become a slave to sexual desire. As soon as Adam and Eve sinned, they became sex-conscious and ashamed of their nakedness and immediately sought to cover their bodies. We live in a world which is still reaping the sad effects of that Fall. As a result, sex which was meant to be a blessing to man has become a burden instead.

The word "sex" itself has an impure connotation in the minds of most people today because of man's repeated abuse of this God-given function. The cinema, the advertising world and much of the cheap literature sold on book-stalls today have all served to give a crooked and perverted conception of that which God intended to be pure, beautiful and holy.

There is abundant evidence to prove that our thoughts about sex are perverted. In '*Christian Behaviour*', C.S. Lewis writes, "You can get a large audience together for a strip-tease act - that is, to watch a girl undress on the stage. Now suppose you came to a country where you could fill a theatre by simply bringing a covered plate on the stage and then slowly lifting the cover so as to let every one see, just before the light went out, that it contained a mutton chop or a bit of bacon, wouldn't you think that in that country something had gone wrong with the appetite for food? And wouldn't anyone who had grown up in a different world think there was something equally queer about the state of the sex instinct among us?"

A Christian is called to shine as a light for God in this perverted world. He must therefore stand against the world's low views of sex, which reduce it to a mere physiological phenomenon and a source of pleasure. He should allow the Spirit of God to so renew his mind that he begins to look at sex as God looks at it - not as something sinful to be ashamed of, but as something sacred and intrinsically beautiful.

Many religions and philosophies hold perverted views of sex either because they look upon the human body as something evil to be cast off at the earliest opportunity, or because they go to the other extreme and worship the body, fulfilling its every desire without question.

The Christian view is that the body is as much a part of God's good creation as the spirit and the soul - although of lesser importance than these latter. The body therefore has a definite purpose in God's plan. The Bible teaches that the Christian should glorify God in his body since it is the

temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:13-20). We are exhorted therefore to present our bodies in an act of worship as a living sacrifice to God (Rom. 12:1).

Martin Luther reminded those who felt that the body was the cause of sin, that the Lord Jesus had a body on earth, but was yet sinless, whereas the devil who has no body, is full of sin. The root of sin is to be found not in the body but in the human heart. Deliverance from sin comes not by eliminating the body and its desires but by a change of heart. We do not have to pray, as some do, that God will remove our sexual desires. That would mutilate our manhood and destroy a part of God's temple. God wants us to be complete men living in victory. The fire in the fire-place does not have to be extinguished. We have only to be careful that the house does not catch fire.

Even in the realm of sex, God permits us to be tempted with a purpose - the same purpose with which He permitted Adam to be tempted in the garden of Eden. Adam was innocent but God wanted him to be holy. Holiness is more than innocence. Adam could have become holy only as he made a moral choice and overcame temptation: so it is with us.

Unclean thoughts

Every young person is sooner or later tempted by unclean thoughts. The sexual urge being stronger and more aggressive in men than in women, the former face this problem much more than the latter do.

In Mark 7:21, Jesus listed evil thoughts as the first things that proceed from the heart of men. The hearts of all unconverted men are equally wicked and so the description Jesus gave is true of all. Unclean thoughts plague the mind of the morally upright man as much as they do the mind of the adulterer - even though lack of opportunity and fear of society may have prevented the former from committing adultery in the flesh.

We need to distinguish however between temptation and sin. Even Jesus was tempted "in every respect as we are" (Heb. 4:15). But He never once yielded to temptation (even in His mind) and so never sinned. We too shall be tempted till the last day of our life on earth. But we need not sin. We sin only when the evil desire is permitted to conceive in our minds (James 1:15), i.e. when we accept the lustful thought flashed into our minds. If we reject the suggestion at once, we do not sin. As the old Puritan said, "While I cannot prevent the birds from flying over my head, I can prevent them from making a nest in my hair". When an evil thought presents itself to us, if we cherish it even for a moment in our minds, we allow it to "make a nest" there and so sin.

Lustful thinking, once indulged in, will make a person more and more its slave. Deliverance becomes increasingly difficult with the passage of time. The sooner we seek for deliverance the easier it will be. Victory over evil thoughts (like victory over all other sin) comes through an honest confession of failure, a real longing for deliverance, an acceptance of the fact of our death with Christ, and an utter yieldedness of our bodies and minds to the Lord (Rom. 6:1-14).

We must also "walk in the Spirit" and cooperate with Him in disciplining our lives, if we are to enjoy continuous victory (Gal. 5:16-19). If we fail to discipline our eyes and ears (cutting off all reading and seeing and hearing that is lustful), we shall not be able to discipline our thoughts either (this is the real implication of Matt.5: 28-30). Discipline of the body is essential for deliverance from lustful thoughts. The greatest of saints have confessed that they had to battle constantly with sexual temptations in their minds. They had to discipline their bodies severely in order to get victory.

Job, though a married man with ten children, recognized that if he was to be delivered from lustful thinking, he had to control his eyes. He said, "I made a covenant with my eyes not to look with lust upon a girl" (Job 31:1-TLB). For men, the greatest temptations come through the eyes.

If care is not exercised here and an unclean thought or picture is once allowed to enter our minds through the eye-gate, it becomes almost impossible to remove it from there.

Disciplining our lives includes our having a daily devotional time with God each morning as soon as we awake and every night before we go to bed. If on awaking in the morning, we continue to loll in bed instead, we shall be leaving the door wide open for evil thoughts to flood our minds. We must fill our minds daily with the Word of God - for saturating our minds thus with God's Word is one of the surest safeguards against evil thinking. David said, "I have thought much about Your words, and stored them in my heart so that they would hold me back from sin" (Psa. 119:11-TLB).

The Bible also says, "If you value the approval of God, fix your minds on the things which are holy and right and pure and beautiful and good" (Phil. 4:8 -JBP). Henry Martyn, the great missionary to India, has said in his journal, that he found great help by obeying this Scriptural injunction when battling with unclean thoughts. Whenever a lustful thought connected with some girl presented itself to his mind, he would immediately pray for her that she would be pure in her heart and mind and that she might be a temple of the Holy Spirit consecrated to the service and glory of God. He dared not harbour an unclean thought about her after having prayed for her in this manner. This is indeed an excellent method for maintaining purity of thought.

Some may say that the prevailing standard of morals in the world around us is so low that it is difficult to be totally free from unclean thoughts. But this state of affairs is not peculiar to the twentieth century. Corinth in the first century was a centre of licentiousness and immorality, yet the Spirit of God urged the Christians there to lead their every thought captive into the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). He tells us to do the same today. The way to life may be narrow and difficult, but the Holy Spirit can strengthen us to walk that way.

To discipline our lives thus, does not mean that we should develop a repugnance for the opposite sex. Far from it! The fact that we find the opposite sex attractive is, in itself, not sinful. It is quite natural. It is not wrong for us to admire a pretty face as a part of God's beautiful creation. But being fallen creatures, if we are not careful, we shall soon begin to notice the beautiful form and then to lust. Thus the attractiveness of the opposite sex, though clean in itself, can become for us, an occasion for unclean thinking.

Keith Miller, in '*A Second Touch*' says, "I have found that becoming a deeply committed Christian does not keep one from being fully aware of beauty in the opposite sex. And I do not think this recognition is in any sense sin or is an indication that one needs a spiritual check-up. In fact, if you do not recognize physical beauty in the opposite sex, and if you are my age, you may need a physical check-up. And I am very serious. 'Recognition', in my opinion, is never sin. As a matter of fact, recognition of specific possibility for sinning is a prerequisite for the development of Christian character. For instance, a blind man would not be considered honest for not stealing gold on a table before him - only a man who saw the gold, and recognized fully his drive for it, but chose not to steal it... It is what one does with that which is recognized, that causes the problems."

Our safety lies in instantly obeying the voice of the Holy Spirit within us, when He checks us and tells us to turn our eyes and our thoughts in another direction.

We should also frequently pray, "Lord, do not let me face temptation (in this realm) that I cannot overcome." Many young men have found victory through sincerely praying such a prayer.

Masturbation

Looseness in thinking can lead to indisciplined indulgence of the body's sexual desires. A Christian can never afford to do this. The apostle Paul said, "Every competitor in athletic events

goes into serious training. Athletes will take tremendous pains - for a fading crown of leaves. But our contest is for an eternal crown that will never fade. I run the race, then, with determination. I am no shadow-boxer, I really fight! I am my body's sternest master, for fear that when I have preached to others I should myself be disqualified" (1 Cor. 9:25-27-JBP).

Again he said, "Everyone of you should learn to control his body, keeping it pure and treating it with respect, and never regarding it as an instrument for self-gratification, as do pagans with no knowledge of God" (1 Thess. 4:4,5-JBP).

C.G. Scorer in his book, '*The Bible and Sex Ethics Today*', says, "It is from these words (of the Apostle Paul) that advice may be found on another matter to which the Bible apparently makes no reference - that of secret and solitary indulgence, or masturbation. The New Testament does not attempt to analyze the secret aspect of a man's life. Modern psychology may try to do so; Christ and His apostles do not. But it is difficult to escape the conclusion that such self-gratification carries with it the wish to rebel against God's authority over our bodies. It consists in making sexual experience an end to be desired and sought after for its own sake. A man or woman becomes a servant to his or her own desires instead of master of them. It is a general principle that sexual thinking counteracts spiritual insight and power; if the impulses of the body rule our lives, the Spirit cannot. Psychologically, such sins often represent an immaturity of character or a self-consciousness and self-preoccupation which need to be overcome. Of course, it cannot be considered serious in the sense that fornication is, for it does not involve anyone else... [but] it puts a man out of sorts with himself for the very good reason that it represents an upsurge of an impulse over which he has to admit he has ineffective control. It humiliates him and hence it may well nullify his witness as a Christian, simply because of this confusion of his own self-esteem. The solution lies with the will and the adoption of the common sense attitude that sexual stimulation can always be successfully resisted if it is avoided at the outset".

Masturbation may not lead to any disease but it does lead to depression, a sense of guilt and a weakening of will-power - all of which finally rob a person of his fellowship with God and his spiritual effectiveness. If indulged in excessively, it can also cause problems in the sexual relationship after marriage. Masturbation is a sin because it is an abuse of God's gift of sex. It must be repented of and forsaken.

It is often because young people learn the facts of sex in perverted form from their worldly friends that they easily fall into the grip of this evil habit. Once this habit is indulged in, it grips the person so strongly that he is compelled to yield to it again and again. But Christ can set him free.

Many young people are taught by their friends that they must indulge in masturbation, lest their sexual organs be rendered useless through non-use, just as a muscle is rendered useless if unused for many years. This is however a totally wrong idea. Medical authorities are agreed on the fact that the non-use of sexual organs can never lead to a withering-up or an impairment of function. Control of the cravings of sex does not do any psychological harm either. In fact there is no danger whatsoever in keeping sexual desires under control. On the contrary, when a person does discipline himself thus, his will-power becomes stronger and his mind more alert. A man can live all his life without once using his sexual organs and yet be perfectly strong and healthy in mind and body.

Some young men may be concerned about seminal emissions that they have when asleep. These are only part of the normal functioning of their bodies in the expulsion of excess matter. They are neither abnormal nor cause for concern.

Every man must learn to control his sexual passions before he gets married, for self-control will be greatly needed thereafter. There is a place for self-discipline in sexual relations even after

marriage, for marriage does not grant license for unrestrained sexual intercourse. One who has not learnt self-control prior to marriage is unlikely to learn it afterwards.

Those who are already in the grip of this evil habit may perhaps be wondering how to find deliverance. The way of deliverance is by recognizing that through our union with Christ in His death and resurrection, sin's hold on us is broken. Victory can be a reality in our lives now as we present ourselves to the Lord to be filled with His Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:2).

We must also plan a busy daily schedule for our lives. Our minds and especially our bodies should be kept occupied throughout the day in some activity or the other. It is the idle, unexercised body that falls an easy prey to sexual desire. The person who lives a hard life will find very little difficulty in this realm. God intends that man should work hard. Adam was to obtain his bread by the sweat of his brow (Gen. 3:19). Science however has now discovered so many time-saving devices for us, that the modern young man finds plenty of time hanging idly on his hands - which the devil is quick to use. I do not mean that we should therefore not use any time-saving devices. Use them by all means. But we should try and spend our spare moments profitably in some form of creative activity.

The energy of the body can be expended in four ways - in physical work, mental activity, emotional experiences or in sexual indulgence. If our bodily energy is not expended in the first three ways, the pressure will be very great to expend in the fourth way. But such sexual indulgence drains the body of its nervous and physical energy and vitality more than any of the other ways do.

Some men are under-sexed and do not feel the pressure within for sexual release as much as others do. Those who feel this pressure greatly because of excessive sexual desire need not feel that they are abnormal. It is an indication of surplus creative energy within them that can be sublimated or expended in very profitable ways. God does not want us to be perpetually fighting lust. He wants us to redirect our bodily energies (that are pressing for sexual indulgence in thought or deed) into paths that would glorify Him and help our fellowmen.

Let every Christian young man therefore keep his body exercised through daily physical activity. Let him also spend his spare moments in serious Bible Study and prayer (this will exercise his mind), instead of in idle talk. He will then find at the end of the day, not only that he has accomplished much, but also that he is so tired that he falls asleep almost as soon as he gets into bed. Instead of being plagued on his bed at night by lustful thoughts and the temptation to masturbate, he will find himself sinking into a blessed slumber. The Bible tells us that "the man who works hard sleeps well" (Ecc. 5:12-TLB).

The task of controlling our sexual passions can be made easier if we discipline ourselves in the simpler matters of eating and sleeping. Many are defeated in the realm of sex because they have never disciplined themselves in these latter realms. There is a very real connection between over-eating and the stimulation of sexual desire. Sexual sins abounded in ancient Sodom because of "over-abundance of food, prosperous ease and idleness" (Ezek. 16:49). Let those who are mastered by their sexual passions discipline their eating habits and seek the Lord's face earnestly in prayer with fasting, and they will very soon find deliverance.

Above all, we should seek to practice the presence of the Lord at all times - being conscious of the fact that the Lord is always with us and watching us. We would obviously not indulge in masturbation if another believer were observing us. How much more should we fear God!

If, in spite of your best efforts, you are unable to shake off this temptation at any particular time, then the best thing to do is to seek the company of another person immediately - (preferably a believer). This will strengthen you for victory.

Adultery

Sexual union between a man and a woman makes two people "one flesh". The Bible says, "Do you not know and realize that when a man joins himself to a prostitute he becomes one body with her? The two, it is written, shall become one flesh" (1 Cor. 6:16). In the Old Testament, sexual union between a man and a woman is spoken of as "knowing". Sexual intercourse is not an act that has merely physical effects. Neither can it be easily forgotten. It makes two people "one flesh". That is why God has placed so many deterrents along the pathway of sexual irregularity - deadly diseases like AIDS and syphilis to name but two. The Bible says that "God Himself will judge those who traffic in the bodies of others" (Heb. 13:4-JBP).

Young men usually look for pleasure and enjoyment without attendant responsibilities. This is why they are tempted to seek for the pleasure of sexual indulgence without the responsibilities of married life. Men who degrade women like that can expect nothing but the judgment of God upon their lives.

Young men are sometimes challenged by their perverted worldly friends to prove their manhood by sexual intercourse. They are derided if they don't date a girl or if they cannot recount any sexual adventures. True manhood however is proved not by sexual license but by self-control.

The Bible gives us the example of David who "lost out" partially because of unbridled lust. Notice the circumstances that led to his fall. 2 Samuel 11:1&2 tell us that he had been staying lazily at home when he should have been out on the battlefield. He had neglected his duty and given way to sloth and ease. Then he saw Bathsheba. Instead of disciplining his eyes he continued to gaze at her and thus fell into sin.

We read in the Bible also of Samson who "lost out" completely as a result of his uncontrolled passions (Judg.14 and 16). When he saw a beautiful women, he forgot all about his calling as a servant of God - and thereby lost his ministry. Many others since, have fallen in exactly the same manner and lost their ministry too.

On the other hand, we read of Joseph who had neither the luxury and ease and position that David had, nor the high calling to the service of God that Samson had, and yet who triumphed completely over lust. *Genesis 39* should be read and studied by every young man. We see there in verse 7, how the temptation came to Joseph suddenly one day, without any warning whatsoever. So will it come to us. If we are not prepared for it beforehand, we shall assuredly fall. If Joseph had been indulging in lustful thinking in his private life, he would have fallen easily. But Joseph had been practicing the presence of God. He had dreams from God. So when the temptation came, the presence of God was more real to him than the presence of anyone else. If Joseph's spirituality had been only something put on to impress others and not something deep and real, then he would undoubtedly have succumbed to such a strong temptation.

Notice too that it was the fear of God that held Joseph back from falling into sin and not the fear of being discovered or the fear of punishment (v.9). Alas, it is only these latter fears that hold back many people from sinning these days. But Joseph's relationship with God was far deeper than the superficial relationship that most folks have in our day.

We read that Joseph resisted repeated attempts made by Potiphar's wife to lead him into sin (v.10). He said, "No" the first time and so it was easier for him to say "No" the second time and easier still the third time. As the hymn says,

*"Yield not to temptation for yielding is sin;
Each victory will help you some other to win".*

Genesis 39:10 tells us that Joseph avoided the presence of Potiphar's wife altogether. This is always the safest course to follow - to avoid the scene of temptation totally whenever possible.

Joseph's example warns us that we will have to be careful in our relationships with the opposite sex. And it is not only in the presence of attractive girls that caution has to be exercised, for temptation can come from unattractive girls too. Some of the latter, aware of their lack of beauty, may at times try to make up for it, by offering greater freedom to men to touch their bodies.

The Bible warns us, "Avoid sexual looseness like the plague! Every other sin that a man commits is done outside his own body, but this is an offense against his own body. Have you forgotten that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who lives in you and is God's gift to you, and that you are not the owner of your own body? You have been bought, and at what a price! Therefore bring glory to God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:18-20 - JBP).

And again, "Run from anything that gives you the evil thoughts that young men often have" (2 Tim. 2:22 - TLB).

That was what Joseph did. He did not mind being slandered or even imprisoned, but he refused to yield to lust. No wonder God honoured him. Perhaps failure in this realm may be the reason why God cannot honour many young men today!

Homosexuality

Homosexuality refers to sexual attraction between individuals of the same sex. It was one of the sins for which God judged Sodom and Gomorrah in Lot's time. It is condemned in no uncertain terms in Leviticus 18:22 and in 1 Corinthians 6:9,10. The Bible warns those who indulge in homosexual practices that they will "receive in their own personalities the consequences of sexual perversity" (Rom. 1:26-27 - JBP). The Old Testament law specified death without mercy for those who practiced sodomy (Lev. 20:13).

A believer should not only have nothing whatever to do with homosexuality, he should also avoid having any unnatural affection towards someone of his own sex. He should likewise resist the subtle approaches of homosexual-minded people. If you are already in the grip of this evil habit, seek the Lord's face earnestly for deliverance and seek to have healthy, normal contacts with the opposite sex. It will help too, if you seek the counsel and prayer-help of an older believer.

Overcoming the enemy

Many are the temptations in the realm of sex that we face in our day. Satan is described in the Bible as a roaring lion seeking to devour, and as a subtle serpent seeking to deceive. He knows that sex is one of the easiest realms in which to trap young people and ruin their lives. Our safety lies in being self-controlled and vigilant always, for even in this realm, it is true that "*eternal vigilance is the price of liberty*".

The injunctions of God's Word are meant to save us from the snares of the Enemy. God has given us many warnings in His Word - especially in the book of Proverbs. Every young person should read that book frequently. Some believers have the excellent habit of reading through Proverbs once every month - a chapter a day. It warns us in advance of the enemy's lines of approach.

If we are determined to get victory, we shall undoubtedly face a battle. But we should not give in. If we have already fallen, then let us confess our sins to God. He is faithful to forgive us and to cleanse us of all our past misdeeds and unclean thoughts. Some who have fallen deeply may have to live with the consequences of their sin, although forgiven. But if we have not fallen so far as that, then let us be watchful, for the Bible says that the one who thinks he will never fall, is the one most likely to do so (1 Cor. 10:12).

God desires to lead us in triumph at all times (2 Cor. 2:14). May we trust Him to do so in our lives.

CHAPTER TWO

OPPOSITE POLES ATTRACT

There is something within all of us that makes us long for the company, friendship and admiration of the opposite sex. We would rather impress one of them than one of our own sex. We feel more disappointed when ignored by the opposite sex than when slighted by our own. A person who denies the existence of such feelings must be either a homosexual or a liar!

In all normal human beings, a change of attitude towards the opposite sex begins with puberty (between the ages of 12 and 14). Before that age, boys usually prefer boys, girls prefer girls. But with puberty, there develops in each sex, an attraction for the opposite - although each will be slow to admit this. This attraction may express itself at times in nothing more than perhaps an increased attention to one's dress and general appearance or an automatic change to a more graceful attitude in the presence of the opposite sex. Such attraction is natural and unavoidable, and is in itself not sinful at all.

Since God Himself has made us thus, He must surely expect us to be friendly in a natural way with members of the opposite sex. God does not expect us to *repress* in any unnatural way such desires for friendship. But He does tell us to discipline those desires so that they do not get out of hand and go to excess. There are, no doubt, dangers in becoming too friendly with members of the opposite sex - especially when that friendship is restricted to one individual alone. But there are equally great dangers in going to the other extreme and avoiding contact with them altogether.

There are those who consider themselves super-spiritual and avoid even conversation with the opposite sex. This, however, is no indication of their being spiritual, but rather of their being unnatural. The idea that friendliness with the opposite sex is an unspiritual thing is really part of the same philosophy that teaches that the single state is more blessed than the married one. Unscriptural teaching like that can only lead to hidden sin - as is amply evidenced by the immorality into which many religious celibates have sunk. In just the same way, the minds and private habits of those who mingle only with their own sex are invariably more evil than of those who mingle naturally with both sexes.

What has been said above is not meant to encourage any undisciplined liberty with the opposite sex, for that can lead a person to the other extreme of licentiousness. All we are pleading for, is a healthy balance.

Dr. Herbert Gray in '*Men, Women and God*', says, "The mutual relations of men and women in the realm of comradeship, and quite apart from marriage, may be so happy and enriching - so exhilarating and so bracing - that one may reverently say the whole arrangement of having divided mankind into two such groups is one of the most splendid of the Divine thoughts. In all life's departments, with a few obvious exceptions, men and women supplement and stimulate one another, and by comradeship make a bigger and better thing of life than would be possible otherwise".

Friendships

The Bible teaches that young men should treat girls as sisters, in all purity (1 Tim. 5:2). In other words, you should treat a girl just as you would want other men to treat your own sister. This is indeed the safest rule to follow at all times.

Both sexes should treat each other with honour and respect, as well as with reserve and restraint. We should never be too personal or inquisitive or even flippant with members of the opposite sex.

It is always wisest to maintain some degree of reserve or at least of sobriety - although this does not rule out a sense of humour. But we must bear in mind that we will be tempted to indulge in excesses of flippancy much more when in the presence of the opposite sex than at other times, and this can be dangerous.

Friendships between the sexes develop very quickly and almost without warning, because the boy is constantly desiring to show off his abilities, and the girl her attractiveness. There are many who seek to be friendly with ulterior motives so one must be careful. A Christian young man should never exploit the weakness of the opposite sex and give a girl the idea that he is interested in her when he is not. Girls are sometimes quick to read a meaning where none was intended. All young men must remember this. They should therefore avoid writing letters or even giving casual invitations or presents to any girl, if they feel that the motive behind such actions could be misconstrued. Even letters on spiritual topics should be avoided in such cases. It is also unwise to approach an unmarried person of the opposite sex, for advice or help in personal or even spiritual matters.

This does not mean that we should not consider a person of the opposite sex as a possible life-partner. But it is certainly unwise for a believer to form any *exclusive* friendships with the opposite sex during student days. A student should keep his emotions in the ice-box and concentrate on his studies. A young man should not normally consider marriage until he has finished his studies, and in any case, not until he is at least 25 years old; and a girl not till she is at least 20. Till then they should give themselves unreservedly and undistractedly to the work of the Lord in all their spare moments. Marriage brings with it responsibilities that cannot be avoided and one will never be free (in terms of time) to serve the Lord after marriage as before. But wife-hunting (or husband-hunting) and exclusive friendships with persons of the opposite sex can be more time-consuming than even married life! Another reason for delaying marriage (as mentioned above) is that young people need the mental and emotional maturity that age alone can bring, in order to choose wisely. We shall consider this further in Chapter Five.

Friendships with the opposite sex should therefore never get too intimate until marriage is at least being contemplated. Young men and women (especially the former) should be careful to ensure that they are upright in their relationships with one another. There must be an utter honesty about one's intentions at all times, on both sides. Failure to abide by this rule has caused emotional upsets and frustrations in many lives. It has also resulted often in failure in examinations and loss of one's Christian testimony. The man holds the initiative and the woman, the power of attraction. So both must be careful.

Young men must realize that they can very easily ruin a girl's marriage prospects by being over-free with her or by giving others the impression that marriage is intended - when there really is no such intention. The boy may escape in such cases with little or no damage to his prospects or his testimony. But the girl, through no fault of her own, could be suspected and looked down upon from then on. Such conduct is unbecoming of any Christian young man. Since it is the man who holds the initiative, the primary responsibility to prevent such a calamity rests on him. We should never play with the personalities of other people. God will severely judge those who do.

Young people often develop a secret affection for someone of the opposite sex without disclosing this to anyone. Such an affection may continue to grow while still remaining hidden. But this can lead the person to disappointment and frustration when "the admired one" marries somebody else. In such cases, it is always wisest to share your thoughts frankly, at the earliest opportunity, with your parents or with an older married believer, and ask them for advice and help.

Dating and petting

And now, a few words about dating and petting, since these are becoming increasingly common in India. By "dating", I mean a boy and a girl meeting together privately and going out by themselves; and by "petting", I mean their indulging in physical contact (apart from sexual intercourse).

It can be said without any qualification, that *in India*, if a believer wishes to retain his testimony and be useful to God, he should not date a person of the opposite sex even when marriage is intended. He should also as far as possible avoid going out anywhere alone with a member of the opposite sex - especially after dusk. Anyone familiar with Indian culture will immediately understand the reason for this. Believers should be careful not to give any cause for scandal.

Some may say that Christ has set them free from being in bondage to the traditions and culture of those around them. Yes, indeed! But remember that Christ has set us free only in order that we might obey the Word of God - and the Bible does not encourage anyone to date. It is totally silent on the subject. Where the Word of God and man's traditions clash, we must certainly obey the former. But in all other cases, we should ensure that our freedom "does not become mere opportunity for (our) lower nature" (Gal. 5:13 - JBP). We are to be governed in such cases by the rule given us in Romans 14:16. Here are two translations of that verse: "You mustn't let something that is all right for you, look like an evil practice to somebody else" (JBP). "Don't do that which will cause criticism against yourself even though you know that what you do is right" (TLB).

1 Corinthians chapter 8 is also relevant and if paraphrased and adapted to the subject of dating would read somewhat as follows: "Now to deal with the subject of dating a girl or a boy. It is easy to think that we alone know the right answer. But remember that knowledge only makes a man proud, whereas love makes him more like God. The man who thinks he knows everything is only showing his ignorance, but the man who really loves God - he alone is God's friend. So what should we do? Should we date or not? We know that there is nothing really sinful about going for a walk or going to eat at a restaurant along with some person of the opposite sex - provided our motives are totally pure. But not all people (in India) feel the same way about this. Most of them have all their lives been used to considering dating wrong. Remember that our acceptance with God does not depend on whether we date or not. If we date, that won't make us better men, and if we don't date that won't make us worse either. But be careful lest your freedom to date causes another Christian (or even a non-Christian who is seeking after the truth) to stumble and fall. Suppose someone (who considers dating to be wrong) sees you going out with a girl (or a boy, as the case may be), he may lose his respect for your Christian testimony. Furthermore he may also begin to date; and he may fall into sin because he may not be as spiritually strong as you are. You will thereby be responsible for causing the spiritual downfall of your brother. When another person falls into sin thus because of your indirectly encouraging him, you are actually sinning against Christ. So I have decided that if there is any possibility of my brother being injured or of others being stumbled through my going out on a date, I shall not ever go out on a date, lest I cause others to fall".

Those who continue dating will find it extremely difficult to refrain from physical contact - beginning with holding hands and going on to kissing and caressing. The urge for physical contact will be stronger in the boy than in the girl, for sexual passion is always greater in the male. Men are easily aroused sexually, and once passions are thus stimulated it will be extremely difficult to get them under control.

Once a couple start petting, it will be virtually impossible to stop. One step will lead to another, and each time you are together, you will desire more excitement than on the previous occasion. Each time too, you will get less and less satisfaction out of it.

Sexual experiences like petting penetrate to the depths of a person's being. They cannot be indulged in without serious consequences. Petting is the natural prelude to the intimacies of married life, and so it is sinful as well as unwise to indulge in it prior to marriage. Petting cheapens and degrades sex and can lead to emotional conflicts, frustrations and nervous tensions which may ultimately cause resentment and hatred where love existed once. It can very easily lead to sexual intercourse - which is its only logical end; and when a couple constantly stop short of such total union, it can lead to masturbation (to relieve the tension created) and later on to difficulties in the sexual relationship after marriage. Feelings of guilt and regret can also remain in the mind long after, as a result of petting.

Many friendships between boys and girls break up after a while, and if petting has been indulged in, the girl can feel used and polluted. The girl must therefore apply the brakes immediately, as soon as she finds any boy inclined towards physical contact with her.

From what has been said above, it will be obvious that dating invariably leads to petting and that petting can in turn cause manifold problems. And so dating itself is totally out of the question for anyone who is seeking to glorify God in his life. Other believers around you may be dating, but you should not be governed by their example. There is no need to envy them either, for their latter end is always regret and frustration. If you honour God and obey the principles laid down in His Word, you can be assured of a life and an eternity that are free from regret.

CHAPTER THREE

LOVE IS A MANY SPLENDoured THING

The word "*love*" is perhaps the most beautiful word in the Bible. Yet because many have failed to understand its real meaning, they have never enjoyed its many-sided splendour. Being more influenced in their concept of love by the 20th century entertainment world and by romantic literature than by the teaching of God's Word, many couples have missed the wholesome and exhilarating experience of true love.

Many a marriage has been wrecked because of a failure to understand the real meaning of love. The emotional thrill caused by the presence of some member of the opposite sex has often been mistaken for true love. Proceeding on that basis, many have married only to discover in a short while that what they considered to be love was not love at all - it was just romantic infatuation.

How often a young man "falls in love" with some girl and then, projecting himself into the place of the hero of the last film he saw (or book he read), begins to feel that if only he could marry her, they could together "live happily ever after". But marriage has a way of shattering the dream-world that an infatuated couple lived in during days of courtship and engagement. It awakens them and plants them firmly in the world of reality. If infatuation is blind, marriage is certainly an eye-opener!

True love

We must understand what the Bible means when it speaks of "love", or else we too shall tread the pathway of failure that millions of young people and married couples are treading today.

The New Testament was originally written in Greek and that language has four words for "love" - *agape*, *philia*, *storge* and *eros*. Of these, *storge* is used almost exclusively to refer to the love of parents for their children and of children for their parents. Since we are dealing here with love between the sexes, we shall ignore *storge* and consider only the other three words. *Agape*, *philia* and *eros* refer to three levels of love - which could correspond to man's spirit, soul and body.

Beginning at the lowest level, *eros* refers to the love of physical passion. It has been defined as "hot and unendurable desire" and has primary reference to the union of the body of one with that of the other. It is a love based on something physical in one person that can satisfy the craving of another. It is a love that always seeks to *receive*.

The next word is *philia*. This is the commonest word for "love" in Greek, and refers to affectionate regard and the love of friendship. The idea is of cherishing. It has primary reference in marriage to the union of the soul of one with that of the other. It is a love based usually on similarity of intellectual and emotional outlook. It means more than physical love but it can still be self-centered, for its satisfaction often comes from the feeling that one is wanted, or that one is a benefactor or a protector of that other needy person.

The third word - which speaks of the highest level of love - is *agape*. This is the love of God imparted to us by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). This word has primary reference in marriage to the union of the spirit of one with that of the other. It is a self-giving love - the love of Calvary's cross.

William Barclay in 'More New Testament Words', says, "Agape is unconquerable benevolence, invincible goodwill. It is not simply a wave of emotion; it is a deliberate conviction of the mind issuing in a deliberate policy of the life; it is a deliberate achievement and conquest and victory of the will. It takes all of man to achieve this love; it takes not only his heart; it takes his mind and his will as well. It is impossible for a man to have this love unless the Spirit takes possession of him and sheds abroad the love of God in his heart."

A Greek lexicon referring to *agape* says, "It chooses its object with decision and self-denying compassion. This is love in its fullest and highest form. It has its source in God. The verb-form stands for kindliness towards its object and has reference to the tendency of the will."

Agapan (the verb-form of *agape*) itself means, "to value, to have a concern for, to delight in and to be faithful to". In reference to the love that should exist between a husband and wife, this would mean that each partner should value the other as of infinite worth; they should have a concern for each other; they should delight and rejoice in each other; and they should be faithful to one another.

The Bible defines *agape* thus: "It is slow to lose patience - it looks for a way of being constructive. It is not possessive; it is neither anxious to impress nor does it cherish inflated ideas of its own importance. It has good manners and does not pursue selfish advantage. It is not touchy. It does not keep account of evil or gloat over the wickedness of other people. On the contrary, it is glad with all good men when truth prevails. It knows no limit to its endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope; it can outlast anything. It is, in fact, the one thing that still stands when all else has fallen" (1 Cor. 13:4-8-JBP).

Another definition of *agape* is: "It is slow to suspect but quick to trust; slow to condemn but quick to justify; slow to offend but quick to defend; slow to expose but quick to shield; slow to reprimand but quick to forbear; slow to belittle but quick to appreciate; slow to demand but quick to give; slow to provoke but quick to conciliate; slow to hinder but quick to help; and slow to resent but quick to forgive".

In the married life of a believer, all these loves should exist - but in the proper order - *agape* first, *philia* next and *eros* third. This is in accordance with the teaching of 1 Thessalonians 5:23, which puts spirit first, soul next and body third. This was the order that God intended should exist in man when He created him.

In fallen man however this order is reversed, and therefore even his concept of love is perverted. An attraction of the carnal mind and body of one to the carnal mind and body of another is what

this world calls "love". It is just *philia* and *eros* - and alas, sometimes *eros* alone. Yet in God's eyes, nothing is worthy of being called "love" unless it has the *agape* constituent in it.

Falling in love

Is it right for a believer to fall in love? This depends on what is meant by the term - "falling in love". The world considers love to be an irresistible power that suddenly grips a man and begins to rule him. If, by some chance, the person who has thus "fallen in love" cannot marry his beloved, he has no alternative but to pine away in sorrow all his days - or at least until he "falls in love" again. A large number of pop songs and films are based on this theme of the disappointed lover. All this is due to the fact that the world can conceive of love only on the *philia* and *eros* level. Such a "falling in love" is obviously wrong for a believer.

For the child of God, love should commence on the *agape* level and should be based primarily on spiritual attraction. Thus alone should he "fall in love". He should live so totally under the control of the Holy Spirit that he is able to rule his emotions, and not allow them to run away with him. The Christian must be directed by the Spirit of God in his love as much as in any other area of his life. The Holy Spirit alone can lead you to the person God has chosen to be your life-partner - and that is the only person you should ever fall in love with.

How careful we should be then! We cannot afford to be like the unbeliever who falls in love with a person and then after some months or years changes his mind and falls in love with someone else. A believer should never be the plaything of his emotions. His love should originate in his will and not in his emotions - for emotions can be very deceptive. Feelings of love need not be absent but should follow the willing of love. But this is possible only when we allow the Cross to operate constantly in our lives, putting to death the desires of our own self and making us accept only the will of God.

Whenever you meet a person of the opposite sex towards whom you feel attracted, you must let the Cross operate ruthlessly on your natural affection, and thus keep yourself from any emotional involvement (even secretly) with her/him. Thus alone will you be in a fit state to ascertain the will of God. You must hold back the emotional involvement until *after* you find God's will in the matter. Otherwise you will find that your emotions dull your rational thinking and you will eventually be misguided.

You must be careful that your emotions don't lead you into situations which you may afterward regret. It is tragic to discover after you have given your love to someone (albeit secretly) that that person is not God's choice for you. To detach yourself emotionally from him/her will then be extremely difficult. An experience of this kind causes many problems and is not easily removed from the mind. Memory has a way of bringing it up again and again even after you are married to someone else. Guilt and regret can then plague your mind thereby injuring your personality and ruining your marriage.

Young men especially have to be careful that they do not get carried away by physical beauty or charm alone. Where there is no true love, physical attraction must be kept down severely. Where true love does exist, physical attraction will not be the main thing anyway.

In this matter of love, as in other matters, the Scriptural command is, "Do not be conformed to this world... but be transformed (changed) by the (entire) renewal of your mind - by its new ideals and its new attitude - so that you may prove (for yourselves) what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Rom. 12:2).

Infatuation and love

There is a considerable difference between romantic infatuation and *agape*-love. Some may ask, "How can I know whether I really love a girl/boy or whether I am only infatuated?" Webster's

dictionary defines "*infatuation*" as "the state of being inspired with an extravagant or foolish passion, too obstinate to be controlled by reason". The contrast between infatuation and *agape* love will become clearer if we consider the experiences of two Christian young men - Prakash who was only romantically infatuated with a girl, and Suresh who truly loved a girl (with *agape*-love). The illustrations given below would be equally applicable in the case of girls. (Many of the points of contrast between infatuation and love mentioned below are also found in Dwight Hervey Small's '*Design for Christian Marriage*', to which I am indebted).

A case of romantic infatuation

Prakash met this girl at college. She was the first girl who looked attractive to him and who seemed to respond to him. He did not know her too well, but suddenly discovered that he had (as he termed it) "fallen in love with her". It was a case of love at first sight. Of course, the girl's physical beauty and charm and a few interests that she had in common with him were the only factors that led to his falling for her. Physical beauty was undoubtedly the prime factor. He knew very little about the girl but thought he saw a few points in her that he admired. He greatly exaggerated these points and formed an idealized picture of her in his mind. He imagined her to be perfect (as no other girl in the world could possibly be) and refused to see any faults in her (even though her faults were very obvious to others). He lived in a dream-world of his own making and often felt as though he were walking on air. He felt on top of the world for he had found the perfect girl. (Infatuation, you see, is blind!) He felt irresistibly drawn to her and he was always making some excuse or other to be near her or with her. He could not think of life without her. He avoided any discussion that might have revealed the differences and incompatibility that existed between her and himself.

Since she was the perfect girl, Prakash felt that he should show her that he was the perfect man. This made him highly artificial, for he exhibited only that part of him which he considered most attractive. He tried to show that he was unselfish and humble. But deep down, his motives were selfish for he was basically a self-centered person. This girl met a deep longing in his own heart and he really desired her only in order that he might be happy. The girl was only a means to this end. He sometimes thought about how he could make her happy, but never thought about making anyone else happy. He felt very jealous and suspicious whenever he saw her talking to any other boy in the college. He was unreasonable and expected her to talk only with him and not even with other girls. All this was because Prakash had a feeling of insecurity, caused by childhood experiences which had left him with a feeling of being unacceptable and unlovable. As a result, he lacked confidence in his ability to win and hold a girl's love. This made him expect from her a loyalty that he feared he had not won and did not deserve.

He was also in a great hurry to marry her, and as this hurry was only to haste to mate, any delay was intolerable. Problems due to lack of finance, parental objections and even sharp cultural differences stood in the way of their marriage; but Prakash, confident that love could overcome everything, shut his eyes to all these difficulties ("A prudent man foresees the difficulties ahead... the simpleton goes blindly on and suffers the consequences"- Prov. 22:3-TLB). When others tried to advise him he refused to listen, for he was under the spell of romantic infatuation. (It is almost impossible to make a person listen to the voice of reason once he is under such a spell).

Then suddenly a small disagreement, caused by a misunderstanding, arose between Prakash and the girl. This angered him so much that he suddenly began to see all sorts of weaknesses in her which he had never seen before - and he told her so. His pride had been hurt and this had jolted him suddenly into the world of reality. He became disgusted with the girl and soon began to hate her too, just as Amnon hated Tamar (2 Sam. 13:1-17). But Prakash was not too upset by this, because he did not care much for the girl's feelings. Besides, he had secretly been having his eye on another girl who now seemed far more attractive and "perfect".

A case of *agape*-love

In Suresh's case, he had known the girl casually for quite some time before he felt that she was indeed God's choice for him. She loved the Lord as he did and their outlook and interests seemed to be identical. For some time he had unobtrusively observed her under a variety of circumstances and had found out all that he could about her. Love for her had grown gradually in Suresh's heart. There was no sudden, impulsive, headlong *fall*. There had been a calm and steady progression from casual acquaintance to *agape*-love. His attraction for her was based on her spirituality and her character primarily. Physical attraction had also played a part - although a minor one - for she was not one who would have won a prize in any beauty-contest. But Suresh considered her beautiful even though others may not have done so. He had tried to form a realistic picture of her, without looking at certain good points only. There was some degree of idealization - that was only to be expected. But reality was looked at squarely without fear or self-deception. (*Agape*-love, you see, is not blind like romantic infatuation).

Suresh's motives were unselfish. His desire for her was pure. He was considerate and was genuinely concerned for her and sought her welfare before his own. He did not want her for his own personal happiness. His desire was firstly that they might jointly please the Lord and secondly that she might be happy (the pathway of blessing is in giving and not in receiving - Acts 20:35). He was prepared to sacrifice anything of his own for her good. He was dedicated to her and wished to develop the potential that lay within her. He had no desire to exploit her in any way for his own gain.

There was a spontaneity and a naturalness about Suresh even when he was in her presence. There was no artificiality. He was transparently honest and sincere.

He did not think about her alone all the time. He often thought of how he (and later on, they together) could help those around who were in spiritual and physical need. At all times Suresh kept the Lord Jesus supreme in his affections; the girl was only second. The Lord's work also took first priority in his life. He never neglected that, in order to meet her. He wanted her also similarly to put the Lord first in her life.

Suresh had complete confidence in her and there was no feeling of insecurity. He never demanded anything nor was he possessive or unreasonable. There was no jealousy or suspicion at all. The greatest proof of his love was that he did not rob her of her freewill. He gave her the freedom to say "No".

When circumstances kept them apart for a long time his love for her did not wane. It only deepened. They had financial difficulties and other problems too. They had to delay their marriage for quite some time because of these factors. Even though he was disappointed for a while because of this, yet he accepted it as from God and as ordered by Him with a good end in view. He patiently waited and prepared himself for marriage during this waiting time. He counted the cost and made every preparation for their life together. This waiting time also served to assure him of his deep love for her and also of the fact that God had indeed chosen her for him.

He did not always agree with her on everything. But the unquenchable flame of his love enabled him to accept disagreements on matters that were not of vital importance, for he felt that these enabled them each to express their individuality.

Suresh's love for the girl was permanent. He could never think of loving anyone else.

The contrast

In these two examples, we see the sharp contrast between romantic infatuation (often mistaken for love) and real love in the Biblical sense. Those who are infatuated may manifest only some of the characteristics that Prakash manifested - nevertheless it will still be infatuation. The case of

Suresh is the picture of a perfect lover. No one may be exactly like him, yet perfection should be our goal. We should never aim at anything less.

It is possible for romantic infatuation to develop into true love in course of time, but it cannot be called *agape*-love until it begins to manifest at least some of the main characteristics of the latter.

Young people, in order to avoid being misled, should be able to distinguish between infatuation and love. Infatuation will wear off in a short time. *Agape*-love will last all through married life and will transform every duty into a delight and every obligation into a joy.

A need for caution

We must take to heart the warning repeated thrice in the Song of Solomon (ch.2:7; 3:5; 8:4), "Do not awaken nor stir up love until love itself shall please" (Berkeley Version). In other words, wait for God's time to love instead of rushing ahead into a wild infatuation.

"Above all else, guard your affections. For they influence everything else in your life" (Prov. 4:23-TLB).

CHAPTER FOUR

TWO SHALL BECOME ONE

One wonders whether there is anything more beautiful this side of Heaven, than the sight of a Christian husband and wife, different from each other in so many ways yet blending together to form one harmonious unit. One finds in such couples the true unity in diversity that God intended to be manifested through marriage. What is the secret of such oneness?

On the other hand, look at the thousands of couples who don't understand each other and who lack oneness even after years of married life. Many of these would, if they could do so, gladly return to single life. Marriage which God ordained for man's happiness has turned out to be misery for them - a veritable hell on earth. They live together under the same roof, but as lonely individuals with nothing in common. They stick together only for the sake of their children, or perhaps because society would frown upon a breakdown of their marriage. Their life has become a hollow pretense. And yet almost all these couples commenced married life with apparent unity and love. Where did they fail?

Obeying the teaching of God's Word in relation to married life can make all the difference between a successful and an unhappy marriage. No Christian should even begin to look for his life-partner until his mind has been reoriented to view marriage as God views it.

What was God's design and intention in ordaining marriage? Let us turn back to the record of the first marriage and see.

In the beginning

In Genesis 2:18-25, we have an account given us of the first wedding in the history of man. It was conducted by God Himself. This passage really gives an expanded description of what was briefly mentioned in Genesis 1:27.

God made man alone first; and it is significant to note that He Who considered *everything* He created up to the first half of the sixth day as "*good*", (note the repetition of "*God saw that it was good*" six times in Genesis 1:4-26), now states that it is "*not good*" for man to be alone (Gen. 2:18). As Milton said, "Loneliness was the first thing which God's eye named not good". God then proceeds to make the woman, to be Adam's wife and helper. After this is done, He now

looks at His creation and uses the superlative "*very good*" to describe what He now sees (Gen.1:31). A married couple made all that difference to God's creation!

Purpose of marriage - (1) *Companionship*

The primary purpose of marriage is undoubtedly fellowship and companionship, as Genesis 2:18 makes clear. Eve was created to be Adam's constant companion. She was made to be his complement in every way - "a helper fitted to, corresponding to, similar to and suitable for him".

God wanted Adam and Eve to live in constant recognition of their need of each other, and together recognize their dependence upon Him. Each of them was to live for the other, and both were to live for God. Eve could not do without Adam's strength and Adam could not do without Eve's tenderness, and neither could do without God.

God intended them to be spiritually strong through such a fellowship. The Bible reminds us, "Two can accomplish more than twice as much as one, for the results can be much better. If one falls, the other pulls him up; but if a man falls when he is alone, he's in trouble... and one standing alone can be attacked and defeated but two can stand back-to-back and conquer (Eccl. 4.9-12 - TLB).

The truth of this is clearly brought out by the fact that Satan decided to tempt Eve when she was alone and not when she was with Adam. Together, Adam and Eve could have repelled Satan's attack. Alone, each was weak. Together, their strength would have been (as the verse quoted above says) not just the strength of the one added to that of the other, but greatly multiplied. It is God's desire that every Christian married couple should manifest such spiritual strength.

But such strength can be experienced only when both husband and wife recognize their God-ordained position in relation to each other. Where a married couple do not live as companions and as "joint heirs of the grace of life" (1 Pet. 3:7), they not only frustrate the main purpose of their marriage, but also leave the door wide open for Satan to enter in.

Perhaps you have heard the saying that God did not take Eve out of Adam's head, because He did not want her to rule over the man. Neither did He take her out of Adam's feet, because He did not want her to be man's slave. But He took her out of Adam's side, because He wanted her to be man's companion and helper. Eve was taken out of Adam's side, from near his heart, so that he might remember to keep her always by his side (protecting her) and always near his heart (loving her tenderly and cherishing her). There is a great deal of truth in that symbolism.

Genesis 2:21 states that after the rib was taken out of Adam, God closed up the flesh at that point. There is symbolic teaching here too. Adam had something missing within him when the rib was taken out. This was not evident outwardly for the flesh had been closed up. This symbolized a void in his inner life that could be filled only by Eve - for she was made from that rib. The Jewish rabbis say, "Man is restless while he misses the rib that was taken out of his side, and woman is restless till she gets under the man's arm from whence she was taken".

Such is the relationship that God desires should exist between a husband and wife, and through such a fellowship alone will God's power be manifested and His purposes fulfilled.

In the New Testament, we find both the Lord Jesus and the Apostle Paul (inspired by the Holy Spirit) quoted this passage from Genesis 2 when referring to the husband-wife relationship (Matt. 19:3-9; Eph. 5:22-33). The teaching of the Genesis passage is therefore of great importance if we are to have a truly Christian concept of marriage.

Purpose of marriage - (2) *Establishment of a home*

In Genesis 1:28, we see in God's first words to this newly-married couple, the second purpose of marriage. They were to be fruitful. The procreation of children and the establishment of a home

was another reason why God instituted marriage. The sexual function was created by God primarily for this purpose.

The Bible places great emphasis on the home as a center of Divine worship and service. The ordering of a home under the headship of God is a thing that brings much glory to Him. God gives us children not only to gladden our hearts but also that we might bring them up in His fear, so that they can be faithful witnesses to Him in their generation. This is stressed again and again in the Scriptures (Psa. 78:5-7).

To build a home that glorifies God and testifies to His faithfulness and His care is the calling of every Christian married couple. Children who are walking in the ways of the Lord are among the most effective sermons that a man can preach. The importance attached by God to this is evidenced by His blessing Abraham for bringing up his children in godly ways and His cursing Eli for not doing so (Gen. 18:19; 1 Sam. 3:13,14).

The importance of this is taught in the New Testament too. In the Epistle to the Ephesians, after the mystery of the "church" as being the Body of Christ is explained (Chs.1 to 3), Paul goes on to say that the practical application of this truth should be seen in household relationships in the Christian home - between husband and wife, parents and children, master and servant (ch.5:22;6:9). It is significant that Paul speaks about the home primarily and not about the local church. This would indicate that it is the testimony of the Christian home that is of primary importance in God eyes. A local church can be strong only as the homes that constitute it are strong. When a spiritual atmosphere is lacking in these homes, it spells doom for the local church too.

It is only natural then to expect that Satan's fiercest attacks will be concentrated on this front. In the first home that God established, Satan brought accusation, jealousy, hatred and murder (Gen. 3:12; 4:8). Ever since, he has not spared a single godly home. Hence, in Ephesians, the section on spiritual warfare immediately follows the section dealing with the Christian home (ch.6:10-18). We are warned thereby that Satan will resist every effort to build a godly home, but we are also told of the armour that God has provided us with, to overcome every attack of the enemy.

The establishment of a home that glorifies God is undoubtedly one of the prime purposes of marriage.

Purpose of marriage - (3) Sexual fulfilment

The command to be fruitful (in Genesis 1:28) carried with it the implication that Adam and Eve were to have sexual union. Marriage is the God-ordained means by which man and woman can find complete fulfilment of their sexual desires. This is the third purpose of marriage.

Sexual fulfilment in marriage involves far more than just physical satisfaction and pleasure. If that was all there was to it, then man would be no better than an animal. The physical aspect of sex is not despised in the Bible. We have already seen in Chapter One that sex as created by God is sacred and pure. But the sexual union of husband and wife must always be the symbolic climax and expression of a far deeper union that already exists between them in their inner selves. It should be the physical expression of the *agape*-love that they have for one another. The marriage-bed must be a sacred altar on which the husband and the wife, through sexual union, express their desire to give themselves in sacrificial service, each for the other, in every department of their life together.

The Bible glorifies sexual love in marriage. It has a whole book describing the story of two lovers - 'The Song of Solomon'. It speaks of the bridegroom rejoicing over the bride (Isa. 62:5) and encourages husbands to find sexual satisfaction with their wives and to be always transported with delight in their love (Prov. 5:18,19; see also 1 Cor. 7:5). There is nothing sinful about that -

it is legitimate and right. It is because of the impurity always associated with sex in the minds of many that they are unable to understand how God could permit all this to be included in His Word. "To the pure (in heart and conscience) all things are pure, but to the defiled and corrupt and unbelieving, nothing is pure; their very mind and conscience are defiled and polluted" (Titus 1:15). If our minds are still carnal, we shall see impurity where none exists. We shall then consider even what God has written in His Word as impure! But as our minds are renewed by the Holy Spirit, we shall begin to view sex as God views it. We shall then recognize that sexual fulfilment in marriage is indeed holy and proper.

In the garden of Eden, before sin entered the world, Adam and Eve were to find sexual satisfaction in one another. With the advent of sin, the Bible tells us that marriage is now all the more necessary (perhaps this applies more to men), since an unmarried man is liable to fall easily into sexual sin (1 Cor. 7:2). Instead of being perpetually tortured by unsatisfied desire, the Bible advises man to marry, for marriage is the only means that God has ordained whereby men and women may satisfy their sexual desires (1 Cor. 7:9).

Symbolism of marriage

One of the most glorious revelations of Scripture is that the husband-wife relationship is symbolic of the relationship that exists between Christ and the church (Eph. 5:22-23).

Wives are told in this Ephesian passage to submit to their husbands, *because* the husband is the God-appointed head of the wife. Wives are also commanded to be subject to their husbands *in everything* (as the church should be to Christ), and to respect and reverence them too. Such submission may not be the accepted custom in our day, but it is God's command. A home where this command is flouted will assuredly reap the consequences of that disobedience in one way or another. A Christian girl who has no intention of obeying these commands of God in married life should never get married at all. Far better for such a girl to remain unmarried, than to be married and then to live in perpetual disobedience to God's commands.

Lest any husband think that God's ordinance gives him license to make unreasonable demands upon his wife, the passage goes on to say that husbands should love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it. This implies that husbands are to love their wives with a self-sacrificing love, giving not just things, but themselves - their very lives - for the well being and happiness of their wives. As Christ loves the church with an undying love, it is the husband's duty to love his wife unceasingly, regardless of whether or not he is loved in return. And remember that Christ's love for His disciples led Him to wash their feet and to die for them. Husbands are further commanded in the same passage to love their wives as they love their own bodies. They are not to hurt or injure the feelings of their wives deliberately, even as they would not deliberately hurt or injure their own bodies. They are to care for and protect their wives even as they would care for and protect their own bodies from harm and danger. A man who does not want to follow such Scriptural teaching would best remain unmarried.

God's intention as revealed in this passage in Ephesians is that every Christian husband and wife should be in miniature a picture of Christ and the church. Their life together should reveal the beauties of this relationship.

The fact that the command to be filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18) immediately precedes this section of husband-wife relationships would seem to indicate that the fullness of the Spirit is to result primarily in Christ-like behaviour in the home. It would also indicate that in order to glorify God in married life, we must be filled with the Spirit.

Before looking for a life-partner, every Christian should ask himself whether he really desires to have a home such as described above. How can one who has no such longing expect God's guidance in marriage. But if this is really your ambition, you can be certain not only that God will

lead you into marriage in His perfect will, but also that He will strengthen you to build such a home.

Celibacy

The Bible speaks not only of the glories of marriage but also of the advantages of celibacy. And so it is necessary (lest we be considered unbalanced!) to add a word here on the latter, before we close this chapter.

Paul speaks about celibacy in 1 Corinthians chapter 7. Some have concluded from this chapter and from the Lord's words in Matthew 19:12 that the single state is more desirable and a more spiritual calling than the married one. But is that what the Bible really teaches?

We must bear in mind when considering 1 Corinthians 7, that Paul states four times in this chapter that he is giving his own opinion and that he is uncertain about the Lord's mind in relation to some of the points mentioned (see v.6,12,25,40). In any case, Paul makes it quite clear that even though he wished that all men could be unmarried as he himself was, yet he recognizes that each person has his own particular gift from God (v.7). It is significant that he uses the word "gift" here, implying thereby that there is no merit attached to celibacy - it being neither an achievement nor a reward but a gift. Jesus used the same word in Matthew 19:11 where He said that some were "given" this ability to live a celibate life. He made it very clear that only those who had received this ability from God were to live such a life (Matt. 19:12). There is no special virtue in remaining unmarried. It is undoubtedly God's calling for a few. But in the vast majority of cases He has planned that marriage should take place. If He wants you to be single He will tell you so. In the absence of such a specific command from God to your own heart personally, you should assume that God wants you to be married.

Those who feel that they should remain single must examine their reasons for choosing such a life. If celibacy is chosen because of a selfish desire to be alone, or because of a superiority complex and a scorn of the opposite sex, or because of circumstances where "*what was desirable was not available and what was available was not desirable*", then it is definitely wrong. If on the other hand, one desires to remain single so as to be more free to serve the Lord without distraction, then the motive at least is pure. But the calling for such a life must still come from God. It was thus with the Apostle Paul (1 Cor. 7:32,33;cf. 1 Cor. 9:5).

That celibacy is more conducive to holy living is a wholly erroneous notion. An unmarried person may have more time than a married person for religious activity but such activity is not necessary for holiness. Enoch "walked [in habitual fellowship] with God [for] three hundred years, and had sons and daughters" (Gen. 5:22). He commenced walking with God only after he got married and had his first son. His walking with God did not hinder him from living a normal married life and having children. Neither did his having a family with its attendant responsibilities prevent him from walking with God.

Paul could not therefore have meant that all believers should be celibate. He himself has said elsewhere that those who preach celibacy as a rule of life are actually propagating a doctrine of the Devil (1 Tim. 4:1-3). The words of Paul in 1 Cor. 7:25-28 need to be considered therefore in the proper context and setting. A.N. Triton has paraphrased the passage thus: "I will not lay down a rule, but these factors ought to be borne in mind. We are (in A.D.55) in a period of distress and impending persecution. Every persecutor knows a man or woman who cannot be got at directly can often be got at through his family. Therefore, married people are in for a time of acute anxieties and troubles... I would spare you these and, therefore, advise against marriage, though please note that I do not say that marriage is sin. I only say that it is asking for trouble at this present time and I would spare you trouble".

This would be applicable even today for believers who are in countries where there is intense persecution, war or other similar distress.

In any case, we should not try to be what God never intended us to be. He has already planned a life for each of us - either single or married. Our duty is to find that perfect will of God and to walk in it.

In order to know God's perfect will, we must of necessity be willing to accept the calling of a single life - should God clearly call us to such a life. Where such a willingness is lacking, it reveals an area unyielded to the Lord, which in turn will prevent us from knowing God's will for our life.

Note the words of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:29-36. A.N. Triton's paraphrase of the passage reads thus: "The opportunity for Christian work and witness is in any case short and limited. We must live as loose to the world... and our families as we possibly can. All these things are merely temporary and there is work of eternal value to do. But married people cannot shirk their home responsibilities and these are much more limiting than the unmarried often realize. If you are married you have important duties at home which you must discharge, and you cannot concentrate without distraction on the Lord's service.

"These are powerful reasons for avoiding marriage, at least while you are young (v.36). Do consider the great privilege of Christian service which is open in special degree for the unmarried. If you would only postpone marriage until you feel that it will be rather late if you leave it any longer (v.36), there are tremendous spheres of service open to you..."

"Now please realize that I do not say this at all in order to curtail your liberty (v.35), but only to help you towards the best and, if circumstances or temperament lead you in another direction, there is nothing wrong in getting married. It is a good gift of God" (v.36).

And so Paul, who began by saying that celibacy was a gift from God, ends up by saying that marriage too is a Divine gift. He was balanced in his outlook on these matters.

It is significant that immediately after the Lord spoke on celibacy, He took up little children in His hands and blessed them, thus sanctioning marriage (Matt. 19:10-15). Such is the balance presented in the Scriptures. We must hold truth in the same balance.

Marriage makes a man complete

It is in very rare cases indeed that God calls a man to a single life. God Himself has said that a man is, in a sense, complete only when he is married. Genesis 2:18 (as translated in the Berkeley Version) reads "And God said, `It is not good that man should be alone. I will make him a suitable helper, completing him'".

It is significant too that the Bible begins with marriage (Gen. 2:18-25) and ends with a marriage (Rev. 19:7-9; 21:2-10), and that the first miracle that Jesus did was at a marriage (John 2:1-11).

And so, "let marriage be held in honour - esteemed worthy, precious - that is, of great price and especially dear" (Heb. 13:4).

CHAPTER FIVE

FINDING YOUR BETTER HALF

God alone can lead you to the person best suited to be your life-partner. In fact He is eager to do so if you will listen to Him.

The Bible teaches that God has a plan for the lives of each of His children (Eph. 2:10). If that is true, then you cannot but believe that God has already planned whether you should be married or not. If He has planned marriage, then He must undoubtedly have planned the person you are to marry too. But God does not force anyone to obey Him. So it is easily possible for a person either to reject or neglect God's plan, and enter instead into a marriage outside the will of God.

Next to the salvation of your soul, the most important decision that you have to make in life is that of choosing your life-partner. You cannot afford to make a mistake here - for this is one decision in life which once made can never be reversed. If you have chosen the wrong vocation, you may yet be able to correct your error; similarly you may correct many other decisions in life. But if you have married outside the will of God, you can never correct your error; you can only try and make the best of a wrong choice. It is a tragedy to miss God's will in marriage.

Many who married in haste without awaiting God's time or seeking His will are now repenting at leisure! Surely their example is a warning to young people to tread cautiously in this realm.

It is far better to remain single than to be married outside of God's will. Even though God may in mercy bless those who miss His perfect will in marriage and who later repent, yet true happiness and blessedness can result only from being in the centre of God's perfect will.

For the glory of God and for our greatest good, it is essential that we find the person God has chosen for us and that we be married to him/her. When God wanted to provide Adam with a partner, He did not make ten women and ask Adam to choose the one he liked best. God made only one and gave her to Adam. Adam had no choice in the matter. The same God has planned only one person for each of His obedient children. There may be difficulties in understanding all the implications of such teaching - even as there are difficulties in understanding the doctrine of the total sovereignty of God when placed alongside the doctrine of man's free will - but it is nevertheless the teaching of Scripture. If we accept His plan, we shall find that the person God has chosen is indeed the best - prepared by Him in every way to be our complement, even as Eve was for Adam.

Abraham's servant recognized this fact when looking for a bride for Isaac. He did not therefore pray, "Lord, lead me to some good girls here from among whom I can select a suitable match for Isaac". Instead, he prayed, "Lord, lead me to the girl whom you have already selected and appointed to be Isaac's wife" (Gen.24: 14,44). When God answered his prayer, he could truly say, "The Lord led me" (Gen. 24:27). That was not just a pious phrase glibly used as some use it these days. It was one hundred per cent true. Would that in all Christian marriages there were that same certainty of having been led together by the Lord - and by the Lord alone.

Parental choice or personal choice

God may lead you to the person He has chosen for you, either directly or indirectly through your parents and friends.

In the Bible, we find only one clear instance of God's guidance in marriage - the case of Isaac and Rebekah, that we have just referred to. That marriage was not arranged simply by the parents - for Abraham did not even see Rebekah, and his servant also knew nothing about her. Neither was it arranged by the boy and girl themselves - for Isaac and Rebekah had never met each other before. It was arranged by God.

This teaches us that the important thing is not the method God uses to bring two of His children together, but this, that it is He Who has led them to each other. Whether we are led to a person through our parents, or through our friends, or by ourselves, the important thing is to be sure that the person is indeed the one God has chosen for us.

God is interested in your need

Many young believers are so conscious of the problems caused by culture and other factors (which they feel are preventing them from finding their life-partner), that they forget that God is bigger than all their problems put together. Others have a secret fear that God is not interested in their problem at all. They may not perhaps express it in these words but their actions betray them.

To all such I bring a message of cheer - "He cares for you... and cares about you" (1 Pet. 5:7). Remember, it was God Who saw Adam's need for a wife and Who provided him with one (Gen. 2:18). Adam did not have to go and beg God for a wife. God cared for Adam's need, and He cares for yours too.

Trust God then and wait patiently for Him to lead you. Restless frenzy can accomplish nothing. There is a beautiful symbolism in the fact that God put Adam to sleep and then woke him up and brought Eve to him (Gen. 2:21,22). Sleep is a picture of rest; and God wants us to be at rest - resting in Him - until the time comes when He Himself will bring His chosen partner to us. This does not mean that we have to do nothing, for the rest I am referring to is not an outward physical one but an inward, spiritual one.

How can we have this rest? Only by doing the will of God, Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you and learn of Me - i.e., do My will in your life... and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt. 11:29). As Jim Elliot, missionary to the Aucas, put it, we must learn to be "asleep in the will of God." If we do that, God will assuredly lead us to the right person in His appointed time. If we are busy doing the will of God in all other areas of life, we need not fear or be anxious about missing His will in this one.

Three excellent books that all young people should read, in this connection, are '*The Triumph of John & Betty Stam*', by Mrs. Howard Taylor, '*Shadow of the Almighty*', by Elisabeth Elliot, and '*Hudson Taylor and Maria*', by J C Pollock.

We must be willing to trust God. The Bible says, "Without faith it is impossible to please Him. For whoever would come near to God must [necessarily] believe... that He is the Rewarder of those who earnestly and diligently seek Him" (Heb. 11:6). If you earnestly seek to do all His will, He will undoubtedly bring the person of His choice to you. Let it be by any means - through parents, friends or directly. Leave it to Him to choose the method. In His appointed time, He will give you all your heart's desire (Psa. 37:4).

God may lead you to the right person, in your local church or Christian fellowship group, or in some similar fellowship elsewhere. There is nothing wrong in considering someone you meet in a Christian fellowship meeting as your possible life-partner, if you feel attracted to her/him. It may have been God Who providentially arranged circumstances for both of you to meet. It is because many hold perverted views of sex and love that they feel something so "unholy" as finding a partner cannot possibly occur in a holy fellowship gathering! But surely there is nothing unholy about finding your life-partner. It is a sacred matter before God. If your heart is pure and your conduct becoming of a Christian you don't have to fear what others may say.

I mention this here because I have seen some tragic cases of believers who did not look for their partners in the Christian fellowship groups they were in touch with (through fear of what others might say), and who ended up by marrying rank unbelievers proposed by their nominal-Christian parents. The fear of men led them into Satan's well-concealed trap (cf. Prov. 29:25), and as a result, God and the church have lost many a potential Christian home.

There are some believers whose circumstances may not give them such (or any) opportunity for fellowship with other born-again Christians, or whose circle of fellowship is small. There are others who may be having problems caused by disease, home-background, unfortunate family situations or cultural factors. These may perhaps wonder how they will ever find the right person. Giving up all hope of ever doing so, many have finally resigned themselves to marrying

unbelievers chosen for them by their parents. All such thinking on the part of any believer is entirely due to lack of faith. Is anything impossible for God? Isn't He interested in each one of us? If your situation looks impossible to you then remember that God specializes in things considered impossible by men. Trust Him and you will find that "according to your faith it will be done to you" (Matt. 9:29). If you keep your heart sincere towards Him and stand true to the principles given in God's Word, you will find that God's eyes will "run to and fro throughout the whole earth" on your behalf (2 Chron. 16:9).

Cultural barriers, parental objections, circumstantial difficulties and a thousand and one other hindrances are no problem to our wonder-working God. I know of a girl who was cut off by her family when she was saved, and who had no-one to negotiate marriage proposals for her. Yet God provided her with a believing partner whose parents, amazingly enough, accepted the proposal without any hesitation, despite her circumstances.

God is the One Who rules over circumstances and if He is our Father, we can be sure that when we ask Him for bread, He will not give us a stone. If evil fathers know how to give good gifts to their children, how much more will our Heavenly Father give good things to those who ask Him (Mat. 7:11) - and the Bible includes a life-partner among those good things (Prov. 18:22).

God is waiting for His children to prove His faithfulness. But be patient. Don't lose God's best by impatience and haste. Many have done just that. Trust Him with all your heart. Those who trust Him wholly will find Him wholly true. No one can ever say that his particular situation or circumstance is an exception. The Lord our God rules over all.

I shall not deal here with how to find the will of God, as I have already dealt with that subject in another book: '*Finding God's Will*'. God guides us through the exercise of our renewed minds, and so I shall mention here only those things that we should look for in a person when considering whether he/she is God's choice for us.

Oneness

God made Eve to be a helper suitable for Adam. So she had to be one with Adam in many ways. In your case too, the person you marry should be one with you in many ways. In marriage, two are to become one. The Bible says that two cannot walk together unless they are agreed (Amos 3:3). There must therefore be oneness, similarity and agreement to a large extent, if a marriage is to be successful. Since the two who are to become one are individually composed of spirit, soul and body, there must be a large degree of oneness in these three realms. Where the union between a man and a woman is a union of spirit, soul and body, their marriage will be one after God's own heart. Such a union will form a three-fold cord which, as Ecclesiastes 4:12 reminds us, cannot be broken - "broken" referring not just to divorce but also to lack of unity between husband and wife.

When seeking God's will about marriage, you must consider the person from these three aspects. Let us look at them one by one. (What I say below is equally applicable to girls even though I may be using the masculine pronoun only.)

Spirit

We must start with the spirit, for this is the highest part of man. If oneness does not exist in this realm, it is useless to look for it elsewhere. The spirit of a man is that part of him that has the capacity for fellowship with God. In an unbeliever - i.e. one who has never experienced the new birth through repentance and through receiving Christ into his life - the spirit is dead, even if he is a religious nominal Christian, active in the work of his church.

Since the living cannot be united with the dead, there is no question of a believer even considering marriage with an unbeliever. If you are joined to the Lord, your spirit is now one with

His (1 Cor. 6:16), and you can therefore consider marriage only with one who is similarly united to the Lord. It takes a union between the man and the woman and the Lord to make a truly Christian marriage. Anything less than that can never be called a Christian marriage.

The Bible commands us: "Do not be unequally yoked up with unbelievers - do not make mismatched alliances with them" (2 Cor. 6:14). The yoke is a very clear symbol of marriage. The picture is of two oxen pulling a plough together - symbolizing a husband and a wife united and working together for the Lord. In the Old Testament, God's people were forbidden to plough with an ox and an ass together (Deut. 22:10), because these two animals had different natures. The believer too has a different nature from the unbeliever. Hence the Bible also says, "How can light and darkness share life together? How can there be harmony between Christ and the Devil? What can a believer have in common with an unbeliever?" (2 Cor. 6:14,15 - JBP).

It is obvious that if you as a child of God marry an unbeliever (who is a child of the Devil - John 8:44; 1 John 3:10), your father-in-law will be the Devil himself! With such a father-in-law, you can be sure of endless trouble for the rest of your life!

Some believers may contend that if one marries an unbeliever, he can thereby save a soul from Hell. But if that argument were a valid one, surely an All-wise God would have urged all believers to marry unbelievers! Why hasn't He done so in His Word? Surely because He never intended marriage to be a method of saving souls. And so, no-one can expect the Lord to back him if he adopts such an un-Scriptural soul-winning scheme! If your partner is not converted prior to marriage, it is unlikely that she/he will be thereafter.

In any case, a believer who marries an unbeliever, does so in clear violation of the command of Scripture and in outright disobedience to his Lord. It would therefore be presumptuous on his part to ask God to bless his wedding.

The Lord can never, under any circumstances, sanction the marriage of a child of His with an unbeliever. (And let me repeat here, lest it be forgotten, that a nominal Christian is as much an unbeliever as a non-Christian or an atheist.) It is pointless quoting the example of some believer whose unconverted partner was converted after marriage, for you are to be governed by the Word of God and not by the example of others. Those who desire God's best should determine that they would rather remain single than be married to an unbeliever.

No-one is under any obligation to obey the urgings of his parents or of anyone else, if the proposed partner is not born again. We are to obey our parents only "in the Lord" (Eph. 6:1) - i.e. only in those cases where you do not have to go against your conscience or against the teaching of God's Word. A believer's prime loyalty must be to his Lord and this may involve his having to stand against his own parents at times. The Lord Himself said so in Matthew 10:32-39. Note verse 37 especially- "Anyone who puts his love for father or mother above his love for Me does not deserve to be Mine" (JBP).

"A father can give his sons homes and riches, but only the Lord can give them understanding wives" (Prov. 19:14-TLB).

Sometimes you may feel drawn towards a girl and later discover that she is not truly converted. Or perhaps you may have already been in love with an unconverted girl at the time of your salvation. The temptation will be strong in such situations to convince yourself (and others) that the girl is really born-again (in spite of clear evidence to the contrary).

If you are a little more honest and realistic, you will reject such self-deception, and preach the gospel to her, recognizing her need of salvation. But be careful to ensure that any response is genuine. Because of mutual attraction, she may go through a process you call "conversion". But such a "conversion" will turn out to be spurious if it does not originate out of genuine conviction

of sin. I do not mean by this that you should not present the gospel to her. What I am saying is that the possibility of only a superficial change being wrought must be borne in mind.

I am reminded of a believer I knew, who was active in the Lord's work. His parents arranged a marriage for him. The girl, a nominal Christian, was not saved at that time, but professed salvation when he presented the gospel to her before they were married. But the girl's real nature was manifested within a few months after marriage. It soon became evident not only to others but even to her husband that she had no genuine experience of salvation at all. She became a hindrance to her husband in spiritual things and very soon he lost his testimony and his zeal.

Beware of such "conversions"!

Satan may show you many good qualities in an unconverted person. He may show you how desirable she is, in so many ways. "She is so sweet and has such an accommodating nature", he will whisper in your ears. But don't give heed to him. He is the father of lies. When he deceived our first parents he tempted them through something that appeared to be so good and beautiful in itself (Gen. 3:6). But God had forbidden it. Even so has God forbidden the unequal yoke (2 Cor. 6:14). Partaking in what God has forbidden, however good it may appear to us, cannot but bring disaster.

I know of more than one case where rejection of the teaching of God's Word on this subject has led to unhappy marriages and endless trouble between husband and wife. The woman who thought she could convert the man after marriage has had all her dreams shattered and is now unable to open her home for the Lord's work. The man who thought that his partner loved him so much that it would be no problem to bring her to the Lord after marriage, now finds that she is a constant drag on him.

The safest thing to do is to refuse to get emotionally involved with any unconverted person at any time. If you feel an inward drawing towards some such person, check yourself immediately. Consider her as a likely partner only after she is well and truly converted.

If you had fallen in love with her prior to your salvation, you must now make your spiritual position clear to her. She must be made to realize that your first love is now the Lord Jesus Christ, and that there cannot even be a consideration of marriage, until she experiences the same transformation in her life. If Christ is not going to be supreme in each of your lives, your home will not, in any case, be truly Christian. Those who honour God in such situations will find that God honours them too (1 Sam. 2:30). Honouring God will involve your surrendering your relationship with that girl on the altar to God for Him to do what He pleases with it. If the girl is God's chosen one for you, He will bring her to a place of surrender to Christ and then give her back to you as He gave Isaac back to Abraham (Gen. 22). If she is not God's choice for you, then He will let her drift out of your life as He let Ishmael drift out of Abraham's life (Gen. 21). You must be willing for either. God will be no man's debtor and you cannot lose His best if you put Him first in your life.

When both partners in a marriage have a genuine experience of salvation, each will be living in the experimental enjoyment of God's forgiveness. In their relationship with one another, this will manifest itself in a willingness and readiness both to ask for forgiveness as well as to forgive each other, again and again. Many marriages are shattered because this element is lacking in one or both partners.

But conversion alone is not enough. Oneness in spirit involves also identity of outlook in spiritual matters. There are vast differences among believers as regards zeal and devotion to the Lord. If a "hot" Christian marries a "lukewarm" one, the net product will be two lukewarm Christians. The temperature of the "hot" Christian will come down to that of the "lukewarm" one. You have to consider therefore not only whether a person is born again but also whether she will be a drag on

your life or an encouragement. She should have the same spiritual depth and hunger for God as you have, and her life must be a constant spiritual challenge to your own. Her spirituality must be such that it evokes your respect. Where both partners are truly spiritual, this respect will be mutual, each considering the other as spiritually superior (Phil. 2:3).

If you have such a partner, she will be able to lift you up spiritually when you slide down, and you will be able to do the same for her. She will be able to sharpen your spiritual edge when it gets blunt and you likewise will be able to do the same for her (Eccl. 4:10). Such a partner's worth is priceless.

But how are we to assess spirituality? Is it by religious activity? A girl who is always organizing Bible Study meetings and visiting homes with the gospel, though possibly spiritual herself, may sometimes make a very poor wife and mother. It must also be borne in mind that an active worker need not necessarily possess spiritual depth, for spirituality and religious activity are not always synonymous. Remember too that the early years of married life will find you and your wife engaged not in perpetual Bible Study and prayer and Christian service, but with noisy children who will demand almost every moment of your wife's time during the day and who will disturb both of you at night. The girl whose concept of spirituality consists in religious activity and Bible Study alone, will chafe and fret at all these things which (she considers) hinder her "fellowship with the Lord".

Assessment of spirituality and even of the fact of the new birth is not easy. It is made all the more difficult by the fact that most people in today's world live in an atmosphere of pretense. There are very few who are totally devoid of guile. Most believers seek to give others an impression of possessing a higher degree of spirituality than is actually the case. This is especially true among young people - and more so among those who regularly attend fellowship meetings. We must remember this and be cautious lest we be deceived by a person's appearance. It is indeed most difficult to form a correct assessment and yet we have to do so when considering marriage. You should not be satisfied with just a verbal confession by the other of an experience of salvation. As I've mentioned earlier, it is possible for a person to testify about the new birth without ever having experienced it. The Lord has told us that we shall know people by their fruits (Matt. 7:16); and if we walk with the Lord daily, He will help us to assess correctly, when the time comes.

The fruit of the Spirit - "love, joy (gladness), peace, patience (an even temper, forbearance), kindness, goodness (benevolence), faithfulness, gentleness (meekness, humility), self-control (self-restraint, continence)" (Gal. 5:22,23) - is what we should look for primarily. The person being considered should also evince a keen interest in Christian fellowship and in the work of the Lord.

A girl must posses "the unfading loveliness of a calm and gentle spirit" (1 Pet. 3:4-JBP). She should not be noisy or bossy as some 20th-century girls are - who give the impression that God made a mistake in determining their sex!

The Bible gives us a description of a virtuous woman in Proverbs 31:10-31. The qualities described there are what every young man should look for in any girl he considers. Physical beauty and gracefulness are despised there, as empty and deceitful. Emphasis is placed on "the fear of the Lord" (v.30). In the Lord's eyes, a girl is only as beautiful as she is holy. If we desire to know the will of God, we must learn to look at people as God looks at them. This is the meaning of the "renewed mind" which Romans 12:2 tells us is an essential prerequisite for knowing God's will. If, knowing that God looks at the heart and not on the outward appearance (1 Sam. 16:7), we still continue to be influenced in our choice by physical beauty, we cannot expect to be led of God. We then leave the door wide open for Satan to deceive us and to lead us astray.

All the characteristics of the ideal wife referred to in Proverbs 31:10-31 have reference to her inward nature. She gives no room for any suspicion. She seeks the good of her husband (in preference to her own good). She works willingly and hard. She has forethought for her family. She is not ashamed to work with her own hands or to do any lowly, menial task. She is thrifty and yet not miserly - for she is generous-hearted and kind to those in need. She knows how to control her tongue knowing when and what to speak and when to keep quiet (how important this is!). She does not idle away her time but redeems every moment. No wonder her husband, her children, and even God praise her.

We may not be able to ascertain with absolute certainty whether all these qualities exist in a girl. Yet if we want to know God's will, these words should remain at the back of our minds and should form the basis of any assessment that we make.

Beware again of the Satanic suggestion that if the person you are considering is not spiritually up to the mark now, you will be able to improve her and lift her up after marriage. That hardly ever happens. If she is not devoted to the Lord now, there is no guarantee that she will be, later on. It is extremely difficult to stand on a table and to pull up another person from ground level to the table top. It is much easier for the other person to pull you down: the same is true in a spiritually unequal marriage.

For a truly Christian marriage the, your attraction should be based primarily on a person's spiritual qualities. If you look for these first of all, you will find that all your other essential requirements are also met in the person God has chosen for you. The principle of Matthew 6:33 applies even here: "Set your heart on His kingdom and His goodness (first), and all these (other) things will come to you as a matter of course" (JBP). One who neglects the spiritual or even gives it a secondary place when deciding, will thereby deprive himself of God's best.

Soul

The soul of a person consists of his mind, emotions and will. For compatibility in marriage, there must be some degree of similarity in these realms too. We cannot be rigid here (as in the case of oneness in the spirit), and we acknowledge that there are exceptions where there may not be similarity in these realms and yet where God may lead to marriage. But we are speaking here of the normal case.

Though secondary to the spirit, yet the soul is more important than the body. Therefore, after having considered the spiritual aspect, the next question that a young man should ask himself is still not, "What does she look like?", but "Does she suit me intellectually and emotionally?". In most cases, God's chosen partner for a person will be of the same mental age as he is. Mental age can be different from physical age. There are some 25-year olds who behave like 15-year olds. Their mental and emotional development has obviously not corresponded with their physical - not necessarily because of any disease or deformity, but perhaps due to their being too dependent on their parents or due to other environmental factors.

There are many reasons why we should consider mental age. Conversation is a very important part of married life, and if there are very few or no interests in common to the two partners, this can lead to many tensions and frustrations. There should therefore normally be a wide range of common interests - for married life is not just a matter of a few months but of many decades. Similarly, if the intellectual ability of one is far below that of the other, it can lead to an unnatural married life. If the wife is the intellectual giant, then woe betide her husband, for he will be nothing more than a pawn in her hand! If the husband is the one far superior intellectually, then the wife will be reduced almost to a non-entity. In such a case, she will be little more than a servant in the home. I am not saying that there are no exceptions to this rule, neither am I suggesting that the intellectual ability of both should be exactly on a par. But I do say that it is

unlikely, if you are a doctor of philosophy, that God will lead you to marry an illiterate village-girl, however spiritual she may be. The wife is to be a helper suited to her husband - and so she must in some degree at least be able to cooperate with her husband in his life and work.

A.S. Triton, in his book, '*Whose World?*', relates an incident which illustrates this aptly. He says, "The author well remembers the distress of a highly cultured man who, when converted in his twenties, had thought that the only thing that mattered was that he married a Christian. He had asked an almost illiterate girl to marry him and she had been unable to resist such a charming Christian man. They found after a while, however, that tensions and friction developed between them. She never read anything, he devoured books. He was academic and analytical, she spontaneous and intuitive. They loved one another and were both genuine Christians, but what they had in common as human beings was slight. The result was a long period of strain and difficulty which would have shattered many marriages between non-Christians. What most baffled the man at the height of their problem was that prayer did not seem to do any good. But prayer is not intended to be a method of avoiding all our difficulties, particularly those we have created ourselves. He was finally helped by an experienced minister who told him that the problems were entirely his own fault and that he must set himself a long-term programme to bridge the human gaps between them. This needed much prayer and spiritual grace on both sides, but it needed action also on the level of the natural gifts and abilities and potentialities that each possessed. She learned to read and enjoy books, he learned to enter into her interests. There are unfortunately quite a few Christian marriages that have run into difficulties in this way, basically because they had not understood (or stopped to think) what marriage is for, in God's plan."

From the above incident it should be obvious that to ignore compatibility on the intellectual level is to invite unnecessary hardship and suffering for both partners. It is no sign of spirituality to ignore this factor, because God's purpose is that a partner should be a true companion.

A wise question that a man could perhaps ask himself about the girl he is considering is, "Is she the kind of person whom I would want as the mother of my children and with whom I could pray and discuss and work out life's problems?"

Coming now to the realm of emotions. There must be some degree of similarity even here, for happy co-existence and fellowship in marriage. For example, it is unlikely that a staid and solemn young man will be able to put up with an emotionally volatile girl. Both may be equally spiritual, but their differences in temperament could cause many problems if they were to get married.

By this I do not mean that the emotionally volatile should marry only those of like temperament - their life would then be very unreal. And if the grave and solemn married only those equally grave and solemn, their home would be like a graveyard! Extreme differences in temperament however, should be given consideration.

Certainly, I would suggest that you look for a sense of humour in the person you are considering. He does not have to be a comedian (it is better if he isn't), but he must be able to laugh at himself. A sense of humour is of vital importance in married life for at least two reasons. First, it acts as a safety-valve. It helps to prevent angry arguments. Second, it adds spice to life. Marriage can be extremely boring with one who can neither crack nor stand a joke!

The third area of the soul is the will. You should not look for a girl who considers it her duty to say "Yes" to everything you say - for then she will be no better than a robot. No doubt it is dangerous for a man to marry a woman with a more dominant personality than his own. On the other hand, a woman who has strong convictions can be a great asset to her husband. The girl you consider must certainly be willing to submit to you, but not to the point of being a mere Yes-woman. Many men have become great through the faithful and honest criticisms of their wives.

Walter Trobisch in '*I Loved A Young Man*', tells of one of his friends who wrote thus about what he expected from his future wife:

1. "She must challenge me to the highest, through absolutely honest criticism of me.
2. When she is disappointed in me, she must never withdraw her confidence.
3. Untiringly she must help me to overcome my weak sides.
4. She must never pretend, but must tell me honestly when I have hurt her".

But that can only be possible where the other partner has a will of her own which she is prepared to exercise. What a man needs is not a slave but an equal partner.

Body

The body is also a part of God's creation and so there are various aspects of the physical part of man, too, that need to be considered when contemplating marriage. We do not want to go to the extreme that some people go to, who marry merely in order to satisfy their lust and to whom marriage is little more than legalized adultery. At the same time, we do not want to go to the other extreme of saying that it is the spiritual alone that matters, thereby totally ignoring the physical. There is a Scriptural midway position between these two extremes that God expects us to take.

Since we are not disembodied spirits but human beings, there must be some degree of physical attraction between the two partners in a marriage. It is not wrong to be attracted by physical beauty, provided such attraction is always kept in its proper tertiary place, next to the spirit and soul. Anyone however, who places undue emphasis on physical attractiveness or on the colour of a person's skin, will eventually find marriage extremely disappointing. If you are initially drawn to a girl through her physical beauty and not through her spirituality, you will find many problems awaiting you after marriage - even if the girl is a believer. With rare exceptions, a beautiful girl is usually very self-conscious and habituated to receiving plenty of attention from men. She will naturally expect such attention to be given her by her husband after marriage. You will therefore find that your "beautiful" wife makes most unreasonable demands upon your time and attention.

Age is an important factor to be considered. Since the husband-wife relationship symbolizes the relationship that exists between Christ and the church, and since the man is to be the head of the woman, it is only logical that the husband should be the older and the more mature of the two. A man reaches maturity more slowly than a woman does, and if he is younger he is bound to be less mature than his wife. This is unhealthy, because a woman should be able to look up to her husband. When the man is older, he has the added advantage of having had more practical experience in the world too. Yet another reason for the man to be older is that a woman ages more quickly than a man - especially after bearing children; and so, if she is older, the difference between them will be aggravated in the middle age. In view of all these factors, it is inadvisable for a man to marry a girl older than himself.

However, since difference in age affects some people more than it does others, there may be some exceptions to this rule. If marriage is being considered with a girl who is older, the difference in age should not be more than two or three years. If it exceeds this, the woman is more likely to be a mother than a wife to her husband. In any case, no girl should marry a man who is less mature than she is.

It is equally inadvisable for a girl to marry a man who is more than ten years older than she is, for such a man will be more of a father than a husband to her.

It is not possible to lay down any specific rules in relation to age, but it is advisable for a man to marry between the ages of 25 and 32. Before 25, he will be immature, and in any case should devote himself undistractedly to the Lord's work. After 32, it will be more difficult for him to make adjustments (which are unavoidable in marriage), as he will be more set in his ways. For

similar reasons, it is advisable for a girl to marry between the ages of 20 and 27. These are not rigid rules, for circumstances and other factors may sometimes compel a person to marry at a later age. But where the choice is in your hands, it is better to keep within these limits.

Factors relating to health, general constitution of the body and heredity (that may affect the children) should also be considered. It is essential that each person be utterly honest in revealing any hereditary defects, diseases or mental breakdowns (in oneself or among one's near relatives), that can possibly affect the next generation. Where in doubt about this, it is better to consult a doctor for confirmation. Such defects need not prevent marriage, for the other partner may feel that the marriage is in God's will and therefore will trust God to overrule or heal all physical shortcomings. But it is wrong and sinful to hide anything of such a nature. Many marriages have been wrecked because some such fact hidden prior to marriage was discovered subsequently. In any case, a believer can never afford to practice guile. There is no need to fear that you may lose your partner by being honest. On the contrary, he may respect you even more for your sincerity. If he breaks with you, because of your honesty, you can rest assured that God will not let you suffer for honouring Him. Where He permits such a breaking-up of the relationship, it will always be with the intention of giving you His best - someone else.

It is dangerous to marry any close blood relation. This is because of abnormalities that lie dormant in a person may manifest themselves in children, if the other partner is a close relative (thereby possessing the same abnormalities). Remember that this is a deterrent that God Himself has placed in human nature, to prevent close relatives from marrying one another. The Bible also forbids such marriages (Lev. 18:6).

In some parts of India, there is a custom for a young man to marry his own eldest sister's daughter (where such a girl is of marriageable age). This is a tradition of heathen origin and should never govern the thinking of any believer. It is in any case contrary to nature and to the Scriptures. In one such case that I saw, all the children born to the couple were abnormal in one way or another. When God Himself has forbidden something we may be sure that there are very good reasons for His doing so.

Love

If the Lord leads you to marry a person, He will always give you love for her. We have already considered in Chapter Three what the characteristics of such love will be. Love may or may not grow to any degree prior to marriage, but it must at least exist. When Isaac took Rebekah (whom he had never met before) as his God-chosen wife, we are told that "he loved her" (Gen. 24:67). He did not know her well but he was sure of God's will in the matter, and so love sprang up in his heart for her.

I agree that God does not usually lead a person (as He led Isaac) to marry someone about whom He knows nothing. But then neither does He normally grant such a spectacular revelation to His will as He did in that case. The primary lesson to be learnt from that incident is surely the importance of knowing that the person you are marrying is indeed God's chosen one for you. And if the person you are considering is indeed the one of God's choice, then, whether you were led to her through your parents or directly, the Lord will put love in your heart (as He did in Isaac's) for her. This love of course will be mutual.

But love cannot be produced to order! If it does not spring up spontaneously from within, but has to be forced up, it will not usually be true love at all. True love grows out of respect for a person. If you do not respect and admire a person you can never really love him/her.

Sympathy should never be mistaken for love. To marry a girl just because her unfortunate circumstances evoke your sympathy is always extremely unwise. You may consider it an act of gallantry and sacrifice, but if genuine love does not exist in your heart for her, your marriage can

end in a breakdown. Love is an utterly essential pre-requisite in every Christian marriage. Sympathy and pity alone can never be enough.

If you do not respect a girl for her spirituality, the courage of her convictions and her intellectual ability, and if you do not have thoughts of admiration concerning her, it would be unwise to go ahead.

The Bible says that love is the greatest thing in the world (1 Cor. 13:13). We cannot afford to ignore it.

Race, culture, caste, and wealth

In addition to all that has been said thus far, there are some other factors too that need to be considered when looking for your life-partner.

One of these is race. Is it right for a believer to marry a person of another race? What does the Bible teach about racial differences?

Colossians 3:11 (TLB) says, "In this new life, one's nationality or race or education or social position is unimportant. Such things mean nothing; whether a person has Christ is what matters."

In Galatians 3:28 (TLB), we read, "You are no longer Jews or Greeks or slaves or freeman or even merely man or woman, but you are all the same - you are Christians, you are one in Christ Jesus."

These verses teach beyond any doubt that as far as our acceptance before God is concerned, what race we come from makes no difference. In our treatment of one another in the fellowship of the church, any deferential treatment because of race is also totally unjustified. But that does not mean that there is no difference at all between the races. In Galatians 3:28 (quoted above), we read that "in Christ" just as our race does not matter our sex does not matter either. But that does not mean that there are no differences between the sexes! A man cannot decide to marry another man quoting Galatians 3:28! Similarly, there are many differences between the races that need to be borne in mind, when considering marriage.

Scripturally there is nothing wrong in an inter-racial marriage. But there are at least two other factors that need to be considered in this connection. First, children of mixed parentage usually face many problems - especially in India. Secondly, a person's service for the Lord will be greatly hindered (in India) if his/her partner is a foreigner. Some people, in their immaturity and in their even greater selfishness, ignore these factors and rush ahead into such a marriage. Years later, they regret it.

Another factor, closely linked with race, that needs to be considered, is culture. In the case of an Indian marrying a foreigner there may be many differences in culture that can make mutual adjustments after marriage extremely difficult, if they live in India. This will also be true, though to a lesser extent, in the case of an Indian who marries someone from another part of India, with a different background from his own. There may be cases where cultural backgrounds can be overcome easily, and in such cases marriage can be considered even though the persons are from different states of India and speak different languages. One common language however is obviously essential. If both partners are fluent in one common language there will not be much of a problem. But it will be very difficult if one partner has constantly to use a language that he/she is not familiar with. The place of permanent residence is also an important consideration in this connection. It must also be understood from the beginning, in such a marriage, that one culture will ultimately dominate the other.

Caste plays a major role in deciding marriages in many parts of India. The caste system is an evil that has been carried over into Christendom by half-converted Christians. Since Christ removes all caste differences, a believer should never reject a marriage proposal merely because of a

difference in caste. A person who is influenced by caste in marriage behaves in a manner unbecoming of a child of God.

However, marriage should not be carried out across racial, cultural, linguistic, or even caste boundaries, merely to prove that Christians are above and against such divisions.

The wealth or social connections of the other person's family should also never influence one's decision when considering a marriage proposal. But the standard of living of the other person must be given due consideration. One who has grown up in the upper class of society will find it extremely difficult to adjust to living with someone who has been used to living at a much lower level. You must be realistic and not idealistic in such matters.

Dowry

Another accursed practice in our country is that of asking for dowry. The dowry system (as prevalent in India) ignores the personal relationship in marriage and reduces it to a mere business deal. Among unbelievers (which includes nominal Christians), such a practice is understandable because, being spiritually blind, they allow covetousness to rule their lives. But what shall we say when most believers also indulge in this practice - even those who claim to be Spirit-filled? Surely the Devil has blinded them.

Many a marriage arrangement has failed because the parents of the girl could not meet the exorbitant demand for dowry made by the parents of the boy. How many girls in our land have been emotionally disturbed and brought to frustration because of this.

God cannot but severely judge those who make marriage arrangements a matter of merely striking a bargain. This judgment will begin at the house of God, in the midst of those who profess to be born again. It is because many believers, who should have known better, have not spoken out against this heathen practice that it is still prevalent in the church. It is a grievous thing when those who should be standing upright for God in a warped and crooked world, become warped and crooked themselves. No Christian who desires to please God should ever ask for, or receive a dowry.

There are those who hide under the excuse that it is their parents who ask for the dowry and not they themselves. But if they have convictions, one wonders why they do not speak up and tell their parents that they do not want a dowry. Perhaps the reason often is that they secretly desire it themselves too. If we are convinced that the dowry system is wrong, we should speak up for the truth. It is an amazing fact that many who are strong-willed in other matters, often act like spineless jelly-fish when it comes to expressing their convictions on dowry!

Some may say that it is only reasonable that their parents who have spent so much money on their education should now receive some money as dowry from the girl's parents. Others may justify their asking for dowry by saying that their parents will need money to give as dowry for their sisters when the latter get married. But all these arguments become invalid when we recognize that the dowry-system itself is displeasing to God. We can rest assured that God will not disappoint us if we obey Him. He will honour you and meet your family's need too, if you honour Him (1 Sam. 2:30).

Others may ask, "What is wrong in receiving money which the father of the girl gladly gives her as a gift?" There is certainly nothing wrong with that. But lest any young man use this as an excuse for covetousness, let him answer these three questions first, in such situations:

- (a) Was money any factor at all (even if the least important) in deciding the marriage?
- (b) Did you or your representative (whether father or relatives) ever ask for the money, after the marriage had been settled?
- (c) Did you secretly hope that money would be given (either to the girl or to you)?

If the answer is "Yes" to *any* of these three questions, you have certainly fallen a prey to covetousness, however well it may have been covered up by different excuses.

It is in such situations that the disparity between a believer's preaching and his practice becomes evident to all. No wonder infidels are prompted to say, "Whatever Christians may preach, when it comes to money, everybody has the same religion". Woe betide the believer who, through his conduct, gives occasion for such a charge to be leveled against Christians.

Many may resent such strong denunciation of the dowry system, but let them remember that the system is a product of man's covetousness, which the Bible says is idolatry (Col. 3:5). One has only to read the severe denunciation of idolatry in the Old Testament to realize how God detests it. The prophets of old were fiery in their fulminations against it. They did not mince words when speaking against that which God hated.

Other factors

Denominational affiliation and doctrinal convictions are also important factors to be considered before deciding on marriage. There must be agreement on subjects such as church-fellowship and baptism, otherwise problems can arise later on. One partner may want to baptize the children as infants, while the other may not. Instead of fighting over these issues after marriage, it is best that these are decided upon beforehand. It is essential that the whole family worship in one church. A family where the father and perhaps some of the children attend one church, and the mother and the other children attend another, demonstrates not peaceful co-existence, but a violation of Scriptural principles. This can lead to serious divisions in the family too. A Christian family must manifest unity in public worship.

Any other strong religious convictions held must be disclosed and discussed prior to marriage.

Another important factor to be considered is compatibility of calling. If you are called of God to work in a certain place or in a special type of ministry you must have a wife who is prepared to go with you. She must not only be willing but should herself share the same calling. Although in India, wives are traditionally expected to follow their husbands wherever they go, yet if your wife lacks your vision she will only be a drag on you and will finally draw you away from the place of God's call. It is best to check such matters before marriage takes place.

Financial resources should also be taken into account. No young man should consider marriage until he has enough income to support a family. To say, "*The Lord will provide*", can be a misquotation of Scripture, for the Lord has already provided us with common sense to think and to decide sensibly in this matter. If you do not use that, it is unlikely that the Lord will do a miracle to provide for your needs when you get married. No believer should make a girl suffer unnecessarily by marrying her before he is financially stable.

Yet another thing to be considered is how long you will have to wait before you can marry. Circumstances or other factors may preclude the possibility of your getting married for quite some time. In such cases, it is wisest not to consider any girl at all until at the earliest *one year prior* to the date when marriage is considered possible.

Forming a balanced assessment

The best and most spiritual person in the world is still a human being with frailties. So the one who is looking for a "perfect" life-partner, is wasting his time. You won't find her anywhere . Even if such a person does exist she may not be willing to marry you, for she will naturally want a perfect partner herself!

All that has been said thus far is therefore not to encourage you to look for the perfect partner, but to enable you to form a balanced assessment of any person you consider, and thereby to ascertain the will of God.

Even where God gives you the clearest possible leading to the person of His choice, you will still find that there are many mutual adjustments to be made after marriage. The more you come to know one another, the more you will discover how imperfect you both are. If you are honest you will discover more imperfections *in yourself* than in your partner. Marriage reveals a person's imperfections perhaps more than anything else in the world. It can shatter the conceited opinion of one's own spirituality that a person may have had when single. As D.H. Small has said, "Marriage at best, is two imperfect people imperfectly related".

Yet, even though we are imperfect, it is possible - yes necessary - to be clearly led of God in marriage. That alone can form the solid rock-foundation for a truly Christian home. When faults and blemishes are noticed in one another after marriage, and disagreements arise, you can have many misgivings and doubts, if you are not certain that it was God Who led you to each other. That is why it is utterly essential for both partners to be sure of the will of God *before* marriage. The man who built his house on the rock took more pains and spent more time laying the foundation than the man who built on sand. But when the storm came, the former realized that it was worth all the effort he had put in, for his house stood, while the other man's fell (Matt. 7:24-27). A marriage founded on the will of God can weather every storm of life. It is worth taking pains then, and waiting, until you are sure of God's will before beginning to build your home.

Forming a balanced assessment is therefore so very important. Due weight must be given to each of the factors mentioned in this chapter, according to the relative importance of each. Some believers fail because they neglect certain factors and overemphasize certain others, and thereby arrive at an unbalanced assessment. Others make the mistake of allowing their *hearts* to be carried away before they have begun to exercise their *minds*. *As a result, their critical faculties lose their sharpness, and it becomes almost impossible to form a correct assessment of the other person. This is why marriages among sensible unbelievers are often happier than marriages among Christians who do not form a balanced assessment before making a choice.*

Certainty

You should never allow yourself to be pushed into marriage by friends, relatives, well-wishers, pastors, or even by godly men, if you yourself are not sure of God's will. It is always best in such cases to wait. If you feel something within you holding you back, don't proceed. Wait. Heed such checks of the Holy Spirit, and you will not have regrets later on.

Some may be wondering how they can ever know anything about a person of the opposite sex, when Indian culture does not permit dating or even (in some places) conversing with them. But the one who thinks that by conversing with or even dating a girl, he is going to know all about her, is sadly mistaken. We have only to look at the thousands of divorces in Western countries (where dating is commonplace from a very young age and where each person chooses his own partner), to realize that dating is not the answer. The solution really lies in asking God to show you the true character of the girl/boy.

You should make every effort to find out all you can about the person, from other believers who know her/him, and also seek for an opportunity to talk to the person face to face. Only thus will you be able to pray intelligently about the person. Since God is more eager than you are to help you find the right person, He will certainly enable you to know all that is necessary about anyone, in spite of every apparent cultural handicap. Trust God to do this for you. Nothing is impossible with Him. Don't limit Him by your unbelief (Matt. 13:58).

After ascertaining God's will, it is usually wisest (at least in India) to convey your assent through your parents or through a common friend.

What if the other person turns you down? In such cases, the best thing to do is to wait and pray. Don't ever try to force the issue in any way. If after waiting for a time, the other person still

refuses to consider you as a life-partner, then you may be certain that you were mistaken in your guidance. Where it is truly the will of God, He will always convince the other person about it too. If the guidance is felt only by you, then your "guidance" certainly did not come from God. If you wait for God's time, He will bring across your path the one He has chosen for you - and in such a case she/he will undoubtedly say "Yes", as Rebekah did (Gen. 24:58).

Parental approval

What if your parents say "No" to the person you consider to be God's choice? Your first step in such an event should, of course, be to pray that God Himself will convince your parents. You should then explain to them the reasons for your conviction in the matter. You must be frank with them. Never underestimate them, for there is much help to be obtained from their wise advice. Even if you feel they are old-fashioned, you don't have to tell them so. Show them sincere appreciation and love. God can use them to save you from many a pitfall in marriage.

The Bible says, "Listen to your father's advice and don't despise an old mother's experience... only a fool despises his father's advice; a wise son considers each suggestion... take to heart all of their advice... their counsel will lead you and save you from harm... their advice is a beam of light directed into the dark corners of your mind to warn you of danger and to give you a good life" (Prov. 23:22; 15:5; 6:21-23-TLB). All this is, of course, fully true only of parents who are born again and walking with God. Yet, even where they are unsaved, their advice can often be of help.

Parental approval is a great blessing and should be obtained wherever possible. If your parents are believers then you should wait until they approve, even if it means waiting for a few years. Where they disapprove, you should re-check your guidance. God will honour you for doing so. He is Sovereign and is well able to change your parent's thinking in His own time (Prov. 21:1). I know of more than one case where He did this for those who honoured Him and waited for Him to work on their behalf. Many others have missed such a precious experience, by rushing ahead in impatience. Hudson Taylor has said, "Conquer through the Lord. He can open any door. The responsibility is with the parent in such a case, and it is a serious one. When the son or daughter can say in all sincerity, 'I am waiting for Thee, Lord, to open the way', the matter is in His hands and He will take it up" (quoted in "*Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret*" by Dr. and Mrs. Howard Taylor).

However, where parents are unbelievers or where, though believers, they object unreasonably *on worldly grounds*, then it is not necessary to wait *indefinitely* for their approval. But even in such cases, one should wait for a while at least (perhaps a year) to obtain their approval, before getting married. If you are convinced finally that God wants you to go ahead without their approval, then make this known to them in a spirit of humility and love. Avoid giving them the impression that you are being arrogant or rebellious.

Our attitude while waiting

Let me add a word here to those who still have a long time to wait before they can consider marriage. The desire for marriage and family life must be offered up to God even as Abraham offered up Isaac (Gen. 22). In other words, you must be willing to remain unmarried throughout your life, if that be for the glory of God. This attitude, if maintained, will keep you from looking at every attractive person of the opposite sex as a possible life-partner. Every spare moment should be turned to account for the Lord in one way or another. This is what it really means to be "*asleep in the will of God*" (Gen.2:21). When God's time for marriage comes, He will give back to you what you had offered up to Him, even as He gave back Isaac to Abraham. There are many who can testify from their experience how the maintaining of such an attitude before God (as described in this paragraph) saved them from many a snare of Satan, and how in the end when God's time for marriage came, He gave them the very best.

J. Oswald Sanders, former General Director of the Overseas Missionary Fellowship, said that when he was a single young man with his life surrendered completely to Christ, he promised the Lord that he would not approach a girl until he knew (a) what the Lord wanted him to be (b) that the girl was the right girl, and (c) that it was the Lord's time to approach her. He also told the Lord that he was willing to remain single. Six weeks after he knew that God wanted him to be a missionary, he met the girl who later became his wife. He felt attracted to her immediately. But it was not until 6½ years later that the Lord told him to approach her. Those who honour God thus, invariably get the best. This is the safest path to take.

A word of caution

Let me close this chapter with two final warnings.

First, never decide on some new person immediately after one proposal or friendship is broken; or immediately after someone whom you desperately wanted to marry gets married to somebody else. The temptation will be strong at such a time, for you will be emotionally upset and you will want someone at once to fill the void in your heart. All decisions made thus, "on the rebound", are invariably regretted later on. Keep clear of all proposals *for at least six months* after you have faced such a disappointment. This will give you time to come down to earth and to think rationally once again. I can think of more than one marriage that was entered into while in such an emotionally disturbed state, that ultimately led to regret.

Secondly, never decide to marry someone just because he/she threatens to commit suicide (or to do something equally drastic) if you don't marry him/her. If you marry on that basis you are certain to end up in regret again.

It is wonderful to know at your wedding, that you are being united by God Himself, according to His pre-ordained plan, to the person of His choice and in His appointed time. Blessed are the couples who have such an assurance.

Theirs indeed is "joy beyond compare".

CHAPTER SIX

FOR GIRLS ONLY

*(This chapter has been written by
Dr. Annie Poonen, M.B.B.S.)*

"She is far more precious than jewels, and her value is far above rubies or pearls." Thus does the Bible describe the virtuous woman (Prov. 31:10).

Pagan culture has always looked down upon woman as a lower level of creation than man. But the Lord Jesus Christ clearly taught, both by precept and by example, that woman's position as ordained by God, was by man's side and not under his feet.

Woman was created by God to fulfill a unique function - one that man could never fulfill. And so, a woman is made differently from a man, not only physically, but mentally and emotionally too. Because of the demands of motherhood, her constitution is such that she is more sensitive, more subjective and more emotional than man. Hence she has a greater capacity to love and at the same time a greater longing to be loved. Without these she would normally feel starved. She is also called upon to be more versatile than man, because of the peculiar functions that she has to fulfil. She is therefore gifted with a sharper intuition-although men may not acknowledge this readily!

G. Campbell Morgan has said in '*Studies in the Prophecy of Jeremiah*', referring to the responsibility that rests upon womanhood:

"It is for women to realise that in them is perfected, for manifestation in the cosmos, the image and the likeness of God; that when God said... 'Let Us make man in Our own image, after Our likeness,' it is also recorded that He made man in His likeness and after His image, 'male and female created He them.' I know the difficulty of stating this and yet it is one of the most profound truths in the Bible if we are to understand God, and if we are to understand humanity, that *in womanhood we have a revelation of that in God which does not find expression in man...* There is given to her, as a separate and sacred responsibility, that into which no man can ever enter for the unveiling of profound truth concerning God..."

"What is it? How shall I express it other than by saying that not only is it true that God is a Father, it is also true that God is a Mother? If the great doctrine of the Fatherhood of God is taught in the Bible, quite clearly also, and quite as clearly, the doctrine of the Motherhood of God is taught in the Bible (cf. Isa. 66:13; Matt. 23:37). In womanhood it is intended that there shall be the unveiling of those mystic and mysterious depths of tenderness, which are of the very essence of eternal strength, which can best be understood by such mortals as we are, by the holy and sacred mystery and wonder and power of motherhood.

"I am not referring merely to the actuality of motherhood, for there are women who have never been in any actual sense mothers, who nevertheless are exercising all the mother function of tenderness and care and strength that covers and guards and heals and helps. It is that strong quality, strong with the delicate weaving of infinite tenderness and gentleness and beauty, which is the supreme glory of womanhood. May God deliver us from a day when anything rough-and-tumble shall spoil the finer delicacies of womanhood. It is in all these things that she is to represent God. In that side of His nature that defies human words, of which we can only speak as "*motherhood*" (and mothers will be the first to admit that it is a rough vesture, this, to express the finer facts concerning God) God is to find expression in womanhood."

Such is the calling of a woman! The peculiar qualities that God has bestowed on her can be used greatly for His glory and for the good of others, if she is truly dedicated to Him. But the very same qualities can be misused or wasted if she does not seek godliness in every area of her life. May God help us to recognise that through the tenderness and charm which are His special gifts to woman, He expects us to add beauty to the common things of life, and thereby to be a blessing to those around us.

A woman has sexual instincts too. Unlike man's, hers is more passive and therefore much more easily controlled. Such instincts, though, are quite natural and a woman would be abnormal if she did not have them. A woman longs to receive attention and love. She longs more than any man ever does, to have a home and a family of her own. Such longings are in reality a preparation for motherhood. This is a healthy thing, for God Himself has made us thus. Because of such longings it is natural for a girl to feel attracted towards a man with the intention of marriage. Men may feel attracted towards girls merely for physical intimacy. But girls normally seek marriage alone in any attraction towards the opposite sex. There are rare exceptions where girls seek to be friendly with boys merely for the purpose of flirting. But this is abnormal. At the other extreme, there are a few cases where girls feel no attraction whatever towards the opposite sex but on the contrary feel drawn exclusively and inordinately to their own sex alone. This too is abnormal and unhealthy, and is often a symptom of homosexuality.

Modesty in dress

The Bible warns young women, "Don't be concerned about the outward beauty that depends on jewelry, or beautiful clothes, or hair arrangement. Be beautiful inside, in your hearts, with the

lasting charm of a gentle and quiet spirit which is so precious to God. That kind of deep beauty was seen in the saintly women of old" (1 Pet. 3:3-5-TLB).

A woman has within her the power to attract men. This is a God-given power, but it is often dreadfully abused. If this power is not kept under the control of the Holy Spirit, a girl is treading on dangerous ground. Girls, as they grow up, become aware of this ability within them, and are tempted to do everything possible to enhance it. The result is an increasing use of "make-up," an increasing exposure of the body (through the latest fashions in clothes) and an increasing amount of time spent in arranging the hair. The Bible says that "Christian women should be noticed for being kind and good, not for the way they fix their hair or because of their jewels or fancy clothes" (1 Tim. 2:9-10-TLB). Here, as in the verse quoted earlier, real beauty is defined for us by God.

Our bodies are a sacred trust given us by God and we cannot abuse them. We are commanded to glorify God in our bodies. This would refer not only to bodily habits but also to the type of dress that we wear on our bodies. In the Old Testament, God condemned the daughters of Zion for abusing, by various means, this power of attracting the opposite sex (read Isa. 3:16-24).

Clothes are often an advertisement of what we really are within – they reveal our personality to some extent. Other people obtain their first impression of us usually by the clothes they see us in. Our witness for Christ can therefore be nullified if we follow the fashions of the world in our dress, for others will certainly notice what we are wearing. They may not perhaps tell us all that they observe, but they will surely laugh inwardly when we tell them that Christ has delivered us from this evil world! So we should be careful about our dress.

I do not mean that we should be shabbily dressed. No. We should make every effort to be neat and even attractive, for God does not want us to be either shabby or unattractive in our appearance. A.B. Simpson has said that a believer's dress should be characterised by simplicity and decency, so that others fail to observe anything special in it, and *the wearer herself forgets what she is wearing*. This is a good rule to follow.

Our manner of dress should in any case never be such that it provokes men to lust. If men are going to be judged by God for lusting, I think it is only logical that God will judge those girls, too, who dressed in such a manner as to cause men to lust.

One other thing I must mention here is regarding the use of the *pottu* (*tilak/bindi*) - the dot on the forehead. It is sad indeed to see an increasing number of Christian girls, these days, adopting this non-Christian religious practice. It is a very bad testimony for a *Christian* girl to wear such a mark, for it identifies her as a non-Christian (even though she may not realise this). It is not a mere mark of fashion, as some would have us believe.

May God give us the courage to stand against all worldly trends and fashions that would hinder our Christian witness and testimony.

Why did God choose Rebekah for the high privilege of being the wife of Isaac (who was the inheritor of the promises made to Abraham)? Or why was Mary chosen to be the mother of the Lord Jesus? Surely it must have been because they had that inner beauty of heart that pleased God. True beauty is inward, not outward - and it cannot be purchased in any cosmetic shop (Prov. 31:30)! No wonder the Bible says that an unspiritual woman with physical beauty is like a pig with a golden ring in its nose (Prov. 11:22). What strong language! But it gives us an idea of true values anyhow!

I am sure many girls are missing God's highest by following the fashions of this world.

Relationships with men

Whether you like it or not, you are sooner or later going to find boys being interested in you. They may be from your college, your church or your neighbourhood. You won't be able to avoid this. So it is essential that you know how to behave with them.

Since the subject of relationships between the sexes has already been dealt with in Chapter Two, I shall not repeat here what has been said there. But I would like to mention a few things that girls especially need to take note of.

Girls, nowadays, marry at a much later age than was the practice a century ago, since more and more girls are now going in for higher education. It is during these years spent in acquiring a degree or some training, when they are thrown alongside young men, that girls are exposed to many temptations. They are tempted to gain the attention of men by using their power to attract them without any serious intention of marriage; and this temptation, if yielded to, can finally lead to calamity.

Girls must recognise that emotional stirrings have a more lasting effect on them than on men. It may be easy for a young man to fall in love with a girl, and just as easily to forget her. He may then repeat the same thing with another girl without suffering much damage to his emotional life. This is because the aim of most young men is merely physical contact, to whatever extent the girl permits. His affections may not be involved at all, whereas a girl becomes emotionally involved in such a relationship. For a girl to disentangle herself emotionally from a boy she once loved is very difficult, and some women have found this to be so even after they are married – a fact that has made their married life unhappy. So there is a real need for caution.

You must not forget that the temptations that come to you through the sense of touch will be very strong. So you should not permit any boy to hold your hand -- much less to kiss you. Once these things are permitted, it will be very difficult for you to hold back vain imaginings from your mind -- and then one step can easily lead to another.

You must also bear in mind, that if a friendship between you and a boy breaks up, you will have to pay a much heavier price than the boy. It will be easy for him to leave you and to get married to somebody else. But it won't be so easy for you. You will bear a stigma ever afterwards, and as a result, you will find it extremely difficult to get a partner later on. This is especially true in India. I am not referring here only to those who have indulged in dating and petting. Those who have had a clean love-relationship with a boy (even if it be only through correspondence) will suffer likewise, if their relationship (or even the fact of their correspondence) is known to others. Girls must not forget their vulnerability here.

Not a few girls have suffered thus and lost their reputation, because they were not cautious in the beginning. Such a thing has not only ruined their own testimony, but brought great reproach upon the Lord's Name as well. It is not without reason that the Bible refers to us as the weaker sex, and as being more prone to deception than men (1 Pet. 3:7; 1 Tim. 2:14).

Let me give you another reason why you should not get too friendly with any boy until you can consider marriage in the immediate future. The unmarried years of your life are the only years when you can serve the Lord freely and undistractedly. After you are married you will no longer be the mistress of your own time. If the pre-marital years are wasted in dreaming about boyfriends, a vital portion of your life will be lost that could have been spent usefully for God. Don't allow the devil to lead you astray.

I would pass on two more pieces of advice on this subject. First, never go to an unmarried man for advice on spiritual matters. Go instead to another woman or to a much older married man. Second, never be friendly with any married man (even on casual terms) without at the same time being equally friendly with his wife.

Marriage

Almost all mothers will agree that in marriage and motherhood, they experience a sense of fulfilment and of completeness which they never had in their unmarried days. I am not saying that those who are called of God to remain unmarried miss fulfilment. A Christian girl should find satisfaction in doing the will of God -- whether she is married or unmarried. And in such obedience to God a single girl too can find fulfilment. Yet it is exceptional for a woman to be called to a single life. Woman has been made by God to be *primarily* a wife and a mother.

No girl need feel that marriage will limit her Christian *ministry*. It may limit her *activity* but not necessarily her spiritual *ministry*. A girl who has been actively engaged in Christian work *will* find that after marriage that her independent activities are restricted and her freedom of movement curbed to a large extent. A man does not face this in marriage but a girl does. She must recognise therefore that God has a different form of ministry for her after marriage. If she is to be free from frustration and disappointment, she must be willing to accept this. Her prime calling after marriage will be as the home-maker. She should make her home a refuge for many storm-tossed young people (and older ones too) and she should bring up her children in the fear of the Lord. These form as important a ministry as any that she could have had in her unmarried days.

As somebody has said, "The woman who is happy in her marriage and who has accepted its full implications, its demands upon time and energy, and the limitations of her freedom, will have a great deal to give others. From her experience of her own home life and the greater sensitivity to other people which married love usually brings, she can create an atmosphere in which friendship naturally grows."

Susannah Wesley was no preacher, but she was a godly mother and she brought up her many children in the fear of God. Two of her sons, John and Charles, grew up to be mighty instruments in God's Hands for bringing revival to England. That saintly mother thus did more for her country than she could ever have accomplished as a single woman. Timothy's mother, Eunice, did more for the Lord as a mother than she could ever have done as a preacher (2 Tim.1:3).

As a preparation for marriage, every girl should read and meditate on *Proverbs 31:10-31* frequently. There we are given a description of the ideal wife. The fear of the Lord is the secret of her whole life (v. 30). But the foundations for such wifehood are laid long before marriage. So this passage should be a challenge to every Christian girl. Everything stated there is so clear as to need no word of explanation whatsoever. One of the good qualities mentioned there is "*thrift*." The ideal wife is one who is careful about the way she spends her money. This is a habit that every girl should develop. Many girls in colleges today are spendthrifts. If you practise thrift now, you will find it a great help later on when you are married. Your present experience will help you then.

Sacrifice is another thing that all girls must learn as a preparation for marriage. There can be no happy marriage without sacrifice. This is especially true for the girl. She will be called upon to sacrifice more than the man, after marriage. She will have to give up many of the rights she had as a single girl. If you do not learn the meaning of sacrifice now before you are married, you will find it extremely difficult later on. So ask God to teach you this.

The most important preparation for marriage that a young girl should make is, undoubtedly, *prayer*. I would suggest that during the two or three years immediately preceding the time when marriage is likely to be contemplated, every Christian girl should pray earnestly and regularly about her life-partner. She should pray that God will lead her to marry the person of His choice. She should ask God to bring every other proposal to nought. In India, this is all the more necessary, since parents have such a large say in the marriage of their children – especially of their daughters. A girl should therefore pray that God will direct her parents too in this matter --

even if they are unsaved. Those who continue to ask God in faith will find marvelous answers to their prayers.

One other practical suggestion as a preparation for marriage: learn some *cooking* now, whenever you find the time. It will save you from many difficulties and embarrassments when you are married!

What to look for

What should a girl look for in her prospective husband? The important points have already been mentioned in *Chapter Five*. I only wish to add and reiterate a few things that girls should bear in mind.

A girl needs a partner who will give her protection and a sense of security - one who can help her, comfort her and understand her to some extent. He should be one who is strong and mature enough for her to lean on, yet one who does not give her an inferiority complex. God created woman to be dependent on the man. So the person you consider should be one who inspires confidence in you, and one on whom you feel you can truly depend.

The Bible says that "the wife must see to it that she deeply respects her husband - obeying, praising and honouring him" (Eph. 5:33-TLB). Love grows out of respect, and if a wife does not respect her husband, it will be impossible for her to love him - except perhaps out of pity. A wife will not be able to treat her husband as her head if she does not respect him as being more mature than she is. So you must ask yourself when considering a person, whether you respect and admire him enough to make you look up to him for the rest of your life. Such admiration can solve many a problem in married life.

I realise that it will not be possible to ascertain all about a person's nature with accuracy. But what has been said above and in Chapter Five, should provide you with some guidelines at least for finding the one God has chosen for you. In any case, don't ever marry a man about whom you know little or nothing - as many girls in our country often do! Marriage is for life, and is irrevocable, and it cannot be entered into lightly.

You may perhaps wonder what to do if your parents suggest an unbeliever or one unsuited in other ways. I realise that it is more difficult for a girl than for a boy, to say "No" to parents in such circumstances. Yet it is essential that you firmly but lovingly stand for your convictions. God will honour you if you do so. Satan may tempt you with thoughts of insecurity in the future and thus urge you to consent to an unspiritual match. But don't listen to him. No one has ever yet lost out by obeying God. So there is no need to fear. If you honour the Lord and depend on Him, He won't let you down. He will give you His very best, in His appointed time. You don't want to miss that, do you?

The question of dowry has already been discussed. Let me add this further word here, that a Christian girl should think twice before she marries anyone who asks for a dowry. He may possibly be more interested in the money than in you. At the same time, don't be attracted to someone just because of his riches or his position. Money is no substitute for love, as the Bible reminds us (Song. 8:7).

The girl who stays single

This chapter will not be complete without a word to those girls who remain single.

In Indian society, it is rare indeed for a girl to deliberately choose to be single. Such a life should be chosen only where there is the clear leading of God - for the consciousness of such a call alone can hold you in times of testing. For some, this may be only a temporary calling to be free from domestic entanglement for a few years when God may call them to some special service. Later He may lead into marriage.

There may be others reading this, who perhaps have had the single life thrust upon them against their own choice. How difficult it must be for you not to feel resentment at the family, the man or the circumstances that seem responsible for your plight. How difficult too not to feel sorry for yourself when all your natural, womanly longings cry out for someone of your own to love and to be loved by. And yet, however unjustly you may have been treated, resentment and self-pity are always wrong - and unhealthy too, in their effects upon personality. They must be confessed and forsaken. Once these ugly things have been purged away and your fellowship with God restored, you can humbly trust in His sovereignty for past, present and future. He is well able to miraculously change your circumstances. But if He does not do so, you can be sure that He has something higher for you in the state He keeps you in. The rich supply of His grace will be your never-failing portion and you will find that it more than makes up for your every lack (See 2 Cor. 12:7-10).

You do not have to live envying your married sister. She undoubtedly has certain privileges that you don't have. But don't forget that you have some privileges too, that she does not possess. 1 Corinthians 7:34 indicates that you can serve the Lord more undistractedly than she can. There are many fields in which you can occupy yourself fruitfully - for instance, in ministry to children and to young people. You will also be able to offer the rich gift of sympathetic friendship - as a result of your own experience - to others who have been hit hard in life's battles.

Still there will be testing, as there is for everyone, in one way or another. Given a woman's sensitive and emotional make-up, this is one of the Devil's easiest lines of attack. "But God is faithful [to His Word and to His compassionate nature], and He [can be trusted] not to let you be tempted and tried beyond your ability and power to endure, but with the temptation He will [always] also provide the way out that you may be capable and strong, patiently to bear up under it" (1 Cor.10:13). An unshakable faith in the love, sovereignty and faithfulness of God is a shield that can quench all the fiery darts of Satan (Eph. 6:16).

There will be no need to give way to the bitterness and the turning-in upon oneself to which many unmarried women fall prey in middle life. By developing a spirit of devotion to the Lord, by glad acceptance of all His ways, and by practising the habit of gratitude to God and to man for the smallest of mercies received, your life can be filled with the joy of the Lord constantly, and overflow in blessing to many.

There are many cases of single women who fulfilled a most remarkable ministry in the church. Pandita Ramabai (a widow), who founded the Mukti Mission at Kedgaon (Central India), is an outstanding example. Amy Carmichael of Dohnavur, one of the saintliest missionaries that ever came to India, is another. The streams of blessing that began to flow from their lives continue even today, long after their home-call. And they are just two among many.

The important thing really, is to know God's calling for your life, and to joyfully fulfil it, whatever it be - for therein lies peace.

His strength for our weakness

Finally, let the consciousness that we are the weaker sex make us cling closer to Him Who has said, "My power shows up best in weak people" (2 Cor. 12:9-TLB). Don't forget that God made you to fulfil a specific function in the Body of Christ. May that be fully fulfilled in your life.

CHAPTER SEVEN

COUNTDOWN TO THE WEDDING

"Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five... "

Excitement mounts at the launching site as the countdown approaches zero. Another manned flight to the moon is about to begin. Months of intense preparation have preceded this day and many last-minute checks are even now being done. It would be fatal to go about these casually - for human lives are involved.

Married life can be far more adventurous - and far riskier too - than any space flight. It cannot be approached casually or carelessly. Preparation is essential.

It is advisable to have a day, some months before the actual wedding, when the "countdown" can begin (call this an "engagement", if you like - the name does not matter). It should then be announced to the public that the boy and the girl are to be married. From that time onwards as the countdown approaches the wedding-day, it is only natural that both partners will be excited. But this excitement should not prevent them from preparing themselves for marriage.

The main advantage of having an engagement is that it enables the two who are going to be married, to get to know one another to some extent, prior to marriage. They can now correspond with one another freely and meet together without fear of gossip. It also enables each to know something about the other person's family – family members and family history. This is necessary in India, since marriage in our country involves close links with the family of one's partner.

Attachment to parents

A period of engagement has the advantage of giving time for both partners to cut themselves off from any *unduly strong attachment* to their parents. It is right to continue to love and to be concerned for one's parents even after marriage. In fact this is Scriptural. But many marriages have been ruined by either one or both partners being *more attached to their parents than to each other*.

Those who have lived at home all their lives and never been away from their parents are more prone to this tendency than others. But the Bible is very clear in its teaching on this subject: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall become united and cleave to his wife" (Gen. 2:24). This obviously applies to the woman too (see Psa. 45:10).

Going out together

Where the engaged couple have opportunities to meet frequently, is it right for them to go out on their own or to indulge in petting? Once again you must keep in mind the principles mentioned in *Chapter Two*.

Going out together *in India*, depends on where you are living – city or village. It is only natural and right that you will want to meet and talk together privately. But this must be done wisely. You should respect the culture of your surroundings and not lose your Christian testimony by doing anything foolish. Going away to a lonely place by yourselves can give room for gossip. You should also be careful not to lay yourselves open to sexual temptation thereby.

As for petting, it is certainly wrong. Engagement is not a certificate for sexual license. There is a right time for everything. There is "*a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing*" (*Eccl. 3:5*). The time to embrace is *after* marriage. Be patient here and you will find your married life more enjoyable, for it will be free from all regret. Where a couple commence petting and caressing before marriage, they lay themselves open to the possibility of personal relationships deteriorating, emotional tensions increasing, prayer together being eliminated (for petting will replace praying), and even indulgence in pre-marital sexual intercourse.

The possibility of engagements being broken must also be borne in mind. If petting has been indulged in, then when the engagement is broken, the girl will feel sorry that she allowed the boy to fondle her body. And so, as I have mentioned in *Chapter Two*, if the boy tries to be unduly forward, the girl must apply the brakes because she has more to lose than he. She need not fear that she may lose him by refusing to be caressed. If he is worth marrying, he will not be offended by such action, but on the contrary, will respect her even more. If he is offended, that will only reveal that he is unworthy of her.

Disagreements and difficulties

Some engaged couples think that even minor disagreements indicate underlying incompatibility, and question whether they should continue their engagement. But the person who enters marriage thinking that he will never have any disagreement with his partner is living in a dream-world, more affected by fairy-tales than by reality. Even in the most perfect of marriages, between the most spiritual of people, there will be minor disagreements. This in itself is no indication either of incompatibility or of the marriage *not* being in God's will. If it were so, there would be no God-ordained marriages anywhere. The only marriage in which no disagreement or difference of opinion ever arises, on even minor issues, will be one, where one of the partners is a mere *robot* without a will of his/her own. Minor disagreements should therefore never be a cause for breaking off the engagement. On the contrary they are a healthy sign of life in each individual, provided both have the capacity to humble themselves and to ask one another's forgiveness. The man should be just as willing to apologize as the woman. In Indian society this is considered a disgrace for a man - but it should not be so for a Christian. A man who is unwilling to apologize to his wife should never get married.

There can be other problems and difficulties during the period of engagement that may necessitate delaying the marriage, or that may cause suffering and pain to both partners - for example, parental disapproval or financial problems. These should not be permitted to generate discouragement and frustration. On the contrary, they can strengthen the bond of love and deepen the foundation of the future home. God knows how much you can bear, and He "can be trusted not to allow you to suffer beyond your powers of endurance" (1 Cor. 10:13-JBP). In His own time He will make a way through every "Red Sea" and will lead both of you triumphantly into the place that He has prepared for you (Exod. 14). So trust Him and don't allow your heart to be discouraged!

Engagement - For how long?

How long should the period of engagement last? No rules can be laid down, but it is not advisable for this period to exceed six months when the couple are together in one place and meeting frequently. Where they are away from one another, this period should not normally exceed twelve months. This is because the emotions of both partners will be at a very high pitch after engagement, and to keep them so highly strung for an excessively long period of time can lead to strains and tensions.

Walter Trobisch in '*I Loved A Young Man*', compares the period of engagement to the time that a baby is in its mother's womb. He likens the wedding day to the day when the child is actually born into the world, and everybody sees it. But before the birth actually took place, there were months of preparation and growth inside the womb. This is indeed a beautiful picture of what an engagement should really be.

Engagement - A solemn covenant

A formal or informal engagement is a solemn covenant to marry and should not be treated lightly. The Bible says that the person who lives in God's presence is one who "keeps a promise even if it ruins him" (Psa. 15:4 - TLB). "God loves those who keep their promises, and hates those who

don't (Prov. 12:22-TLB). A Christian's "Yes" should mean "Yes" and his "No", "No" (Matt. 5:37; James 5:12).

May an engagement be broken off if new facts are brought to light which raise doubts about the wisdom of the marriage? If the other person is not born again, then you must certainly break off the engagement immediately - although the fact of the new birth should have been verified before the engagement. Such a withdrawal of promise does not constitute a breaking of the commands mentioned in the paragraph above, for the marriage would be not only to your detriment, but to the detriment of the Lord's cause on earth also. You should be guided by 2 Corinthians 6:14 here.

If the other person is born again, then the only grounds on which you should break off an engagement, are that the other person has proved unfaithful to you, or that some really serious incompatibility not known before, is discovered, such as for example, sharp doctrinal difference on vital issues. God certainly cannot honour those capricious believers who give their word to a person and then just as quickly break it because they say they are now uncertain of God's will. I know of one young man who broke off his engagement merely because he wanted to go abroad. This left the girl in an extremely difficult position and her parents found it difficult to find someone to marry her. Men are more often guilty than women of such behaviour. Unstable people like that are a disgrace to the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ. One must be hundred per cent sure before giving his word. When unsure, it is always best to wait. But we shouldn't ruin other people's lives by our fickle-mindedness. "It is far better *not* to say you'll do something, than to say you will and then not to do it" (Eccl. 5:5-TLB).

Seeking advice

It is most advisable for those getting married to consult at least one married believer of their own sex, in whom they have confidence, and ask for advice on married life. The advice thus received can be of immense value.

It is also necessary that both partners have a general idea of sexual anatomy and the physiology of the principles of reproduction, and of the physical aspects of marriage. For this, they should individually consult a married doctor of their own sex, preferably a believer. Some married couples experience frustration because of continued sexual maladjustment - which in turn is often the result of ignorance. Information on sexual anatomy and physiology can be found nowadays in a number of good Christian books

Plans for the wedding

Both partners must discuss and plan the details of their wedding. They should then inform their parents and their pastor how they wish to have it conducted. Every believer should insist on a plain and simple Christ-honouring wedding, with no non-Christian customs or rituals incorporated therein. Alas, many "Christian" weddings in India are plagued with customs borrowed from non-Christian religions. It is a shame that even believers often submit themselves to such rituals. They say, in defence, that they do not want to offend their parents and their relatives. Apparently they do not mind if God is offended and grieved and dishonoured. They fear their relatives more than they fear God and so "worship and serve the creature more than the Creator" (Rom. 1:25). It is presumptuous to expect God's presence to grace a wedding, if the door is left open for non-Christian rituals on the occasion. Stick closely to the Word of God and refuse to compromise at any cost - and God will honour you.

The wedding provides an ideal opportunity for both the bride and bridegroom to give a short testimony of their faith in Christ. This opportunity should not be missed but should be utilised. All this should be discussed with parents and pastor well in advance, and the wedding planned accordingly.

After the wedding

Immediately after the wedding, or as soon as possible thereafter, it will be good, if the couple can go off together to a quiet place for at least one week by themselves, when they can be alone with each other and with the Lord. Whether this is called a "honeymoon", or not, such a time can be of great value. If this appears impossible in your case, for one reason or another, make it a matter of prayer and you may be surprised to see what the Lord can do for you.

After marriage, it is always preferable for the couple to stay in a home of their own, even if that be a small hut. Staying with relatives can cause many problems and tensions. In India, due to financial reasons, a couple may in some cases, have to stay with their parents. Such couples should make this a matter for serious prayer, for it is God's will that each family should be a separate unit. They should trust God to open a way for them to set up their own home as soon as possible.

We have seen above some of the main factors to be considered in preparation for marriage. None of them should be taken lightly. The effective take-off of a space-rocket depends on the careful preparation that has preceded the zero-hour. Even so, the foundations for a happy marriage are laid long before the wedding-day.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE HIGHWAY OF HAPPINESS

There is a Highway of Happiness in the realms of sex, love and marriage that God wants us to tread. But many seem to prefer walking in the gutter of misery!

The issues involved in relation to these subjects have been made clear. It remains now for us to make the choice. Each one of us stands before God alone in the secret area of his/her heart. No one other than God and you may know the decisions you make there. But the effectiveness and blessedness of your life will depend on those decisions. There is a price to be paid, if we are to walk along God's Highway - the price of obedience to God at every step - for the Highway of Happiness is also the Highway of Holiness (cf. Isa. 35:8 with 10).

God has created fences on either side of this Highway, and the Bible warns us that whoever breaks through these fences will be bitten by a serpent (Eccl. 10:8). In the garden of Eden too, God fenced off one forbidden tree. But Satan showed Eve the beauty of the fruit of that tree, told her of the advantages of eating it, and assured her that she would not suffer any consequences if she ate it. She was thus lured into breaking through the fence and was promptly bitten by that old Serpent, the Devil.

The forbidden realms in sex, love and marriage that God has fenced off, are clearly shown in the Bible - and made plain in this book. The Devil however, has succeeded in luring millions of young people (and older people too) to leave God's Highway, break through God's fencing and partake in what God has forbidden. These folk discover too late that the bite of the Serpent is as deadly today as it was in the time of our first parents.

Our safety lies in abiding rigidly by the Word of God - in respecting the fences that God Himself has erected. Beware of breaking through them, "lest afterwards you groan in anguish and in shame... and you say, 'Oh, if only I had listened! If only I had not demanded my own way! Oh, why wouldn't I take advice? Why was I so stupid? For now I must face public disgrace'" (Prov. 5:11-14-TLB).

We can never "ignore God and get away with it" (Gal. 6:7-TLB).

Cups running over

The wedding at Cana, on the other hand, gives us a glimpse of the blessedness that comes through honouring God (John 2:1-11). It is significant that it was at a wedding, that Jesus decided to manifest His glory for the first time. Even today, He desires to manifest His glory at every wedding and in every marriage. Sex, love and marriage are among His most precious gifts to us and can be the means whereby He reveals His glory not only to us but through us to others as well - if only we will let Him.

The shortage of wine at Cana indicates that problems and needs will arise in every marriage. These problems can ultimately lead both husband and wife to a point of continued frustration and despair. But when Jesus is given the pre-eminent place in a marriage, He very soon solves the problems and meets the needs - as He did at Cana.

It is not enough for Christ to be invited as a guest into the home; He must be Lord. It is mere mockery to hang a placard on the wall which reads, "CHRIST IS THE HEAD OF THIS HOUSE", if in actual fact the husband (or the wife!) is the real head. But wherever Christ is truly acknowledged as Head and Lord, He manifests His glory as really as He did at Cana two thousand years ago (v.11).

"Whatever He says to you, do it", was the advice given by Mary to the servants there (v.5). They heeded that advice and obeyed Jesus implicitly and immediately - and soon the problem was solved. If only married couples (as well as young people contemplating marriage) would heed the same advice and render the same implicit and immediate obedience to the Lord's commands, how soon their problems would find a solution.

The water was transformed into wine at that wedding. That which was tasteless and colourless and ordinary was changed in a moment into something sweet and sparkling and costly. This symbolizes how the common things of married life (including the monotonous drudgery of daily routine) can begin to sparkle with a lustre, when the Lord is given full control of the home. The tasteless becomes sweet, and infinite value begins to be seen in that which was formerly despised as common.

The needs of many people were met too, as a result of that miracle. A Christian marriage never fulfills its purpose by providing happiness merely for both the partners. God's intention is that married couples should have their cups "running over" constantly (Psa. 23:5). They should be the means of blessing to many others - in fact to every one they meet. God once said to an obedient servant of His - "I will bless you... and you shall be a blessing - dispensing good to others... (and) in you shall all the families and kindred of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 12:2,3). That blessing of God is for us too, according to Galatians 3:14. What greater aim could one have in marriage than that? But the measure in which we become a blessing to others will depend on the measure in which we obey God in our daily life. "In your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have heard and obeyed My voice", said the Lord to Abraham (Gen. 22:18).

The miracle at Cana holds out a message of hope too, *for those who have blundered and failed in the realms of sex, love and marriage*. When the wine failed at Cana, they turned to the Lord and He did not let them down. He will not let you down either, if you turn to Him in your need - *no matter how great your failure may have been*. He only asks you to be honest about that need (as those in Cana were) and to tell Him of your failure. Have you through your foolishness, allowed things to go too far with that girl (or that boy)? Have you blundered in the matter of love - perhaps through ignorance? Are you, as a result, facing embarrassment and frustration now? Do others misunderstand you and reproach you - or perhaps malign you? Then turn to the Lord at once, without a moment's delay. He is the Friend of sinners. He waits not only to forgive your sin but also to clean up the mess that Satan has made of your life. It was to fulfill these two purposes

that He came into the world (1 John 3:5,8). Don't give way to discouragement, for there is hope even for you. The Lord more than made up for the lack at that wedding in Cana, and He can more than make up for every lack in your life. The Lord manifested His glory at Cana, and He can do the same in your case.

If you have faced disappointment, take heart from the fact that true blessedness in the Christian life comes through renouncing and not through possessing (Acts 20:35). God can make all things work together for your good, and help you to live a full life for His glory in spite of unfulfilled desires.

From glory to glory

Let your aim be to glorify God in the realms of sex, love and marriage, and you will then have no need to fear that you might miss His perfect will in these areas. He will assuredly lead you along that Highway, where no lion or ravenous beast is found, but where instead the glory of God shines more and more - brighter and clearer - until the very end of life's journey. May you tread this Heavenly Highway all your life. Amen.

A WEDDING PRAYER AND HYMN OF CONSECRATION

Lord Jesus Christ, we bow in full surrender,
For Thou hast purchased us on Calvary;
Now we are Thine, and Thine alone forever,
And Thou our portion for eternity.

Far more than all our asking and our thinking,
Have been Thy blessings on our lives, dear Lord;
With praise and song our grateful hearts are ringing
For binding us with Love's eternal cord.

We seek to serve Thee, conscious of our weakness,
Knowing full well that we are poor and frail;
Yet knowing too that Thy Almighty fullness
Will be our strength and we shall never fail.

We want the fellowship of Thy affliction;
We want to glory only in Thy Cross;
Our one desire - to give Thee satisfaction;
And we shall count all earthly gain as loss.

Reproach and scorn, this world may heap upon us;
Sorrows and trials may lie in our way;
Still we would walk with Thee alone, Lord Jesus,
Still we would love Thee more and more each day.

Give us the joy of helping others daily-
Sharing their griefs, their burdens and their tears;
O help us, Lord, to turn their eyes to Calv'ry

To find deliv'rance from their sins and fears.

Lord, fill us with Thy Spirit's mighty power;
Make us a blessing to each one we meet;
O let Thy life flow through us like a river,
And help us spread abroad Thy savour sweet.

We only long to do Thy will forever,
Only and ever, Lord, to live for Thee;
Then one glad day we'll reign with Thee in splendour,
And share Thy glory through eternity.

- Zac and Annie Poonen (written
for our wedding)

(11.10.11.10 metre as in the hymn "O
Perfect Love")