

The Betrothal: Is It Still Relevant?

“...It is time to call the Body of Christ to a return to the meaning of betrothal. The very structure of our homes is at stake.”

by JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

Many of us who are serious about our Christianity — who see it as a “way of life” rather than a garment to be donned on Sunday — have a growing concern about the erosion of the home in today’s society.

We live in an age of “quickie” marriages. Quicker divorces. In many circles there is obvious approval of men and women living together without marriage. And in all but a few instances, marriage is looked upon as, at best, a legal convenience.

The idea of Christ being the head of our home would be considered by Johnny Carson, Merv Griffin,

Last year I prepared an article on the place of betrothal for a well-known charismatic teaching magazine. The editor rejected the article, saying that even though it was right and needed, he thought it was too far ahead of the time and therefore could not be accepted by the majority of Christian young people today.

I wrote the editor back and told him I rejected his rejection. The state of marriage is in danger of falling. Many Christian young people wait until after they are married before learning anything of the seriousness of the contract.

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ferent approach to marriage. It was recognized simply as two becoming one.

In contrast to the later philosophy of the Greeks and Romans—who saw marriage as a means of increasing national power—the Jews considered marriage as a “building of joy,” the founding of a home—which was the most important part of their society.

As in all building projects, the foundation—or footing—was of primary importance. In building the structure of the home the Jews recognized the footing of the betrothal (or engagement, as we might call it today) to be of equal or perhaps more importance than the ongoing super-

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Muhammad Ali and others who run our culture as “squaresville.”

The best reaction Christians have been able to give to this problem has been: (1) To fortify our own marriages with Biblical principles, (2) To train our children so they will not be caught in the snares of this world’s philosophies, and (3) To cling to what we believe are the eternal values set forth in the Bible.

Over the past dozen years there has been much teaching on the subject of the home, especially dealing with divine order, healthy sexual relationships and the rearing of children. In most cases this teaching has been designed to help save floundering homes, to give guidance to young couples “setting sail on the Sea of Matrimony,” and to strengthen stable marriages.

Yet in the midst of this it seems one great Biblical principle has not only been underplayed, but disregarded. The betrothal.

ferent approach to marriage: One in which the parents of the bride and groom are involved in the choosing process—perhaps from childhood, one in which the engagement is of more importance than the actual wedding, one in which an engagement ceremony is performed, one in which long term preparation is not only good, but mandatory.

Unless Christians return to *all* the Biblical principles, including the concepts of preparation for marriage, the home will not stand amidst the mounting pressures of the world.

Marriage in the Old Testament times required not state or religious sanction. It was a private affair, not just between two people, but between two families. The good of the family was paramount. There was no marriage “contract” except the good will involved in exchanging gifts. It was a “sanctification” (*kiddushin*) in which God himself was expected to make the bride and groom into a new

structure of the marriage itself.

Perhaps in imitation of the Father of the Universe who provided Adam with a wife, Jewish fathers from the beginning considered it their duty and high privilege to secure wives for their sons—and occasionally husbands for their daughters.

After the selection, the bridegroom and the father of the bride entered into a formal contract—in which the bride was involved—called an *espousal*. While it is similar to our “engagement,” it went far beyond that and had not only spiritual, but legal restrictions. It was confirmed by oaths and accompanied by gifts, which when received by the bride, constituted a legal contract.

The betrothal actually marked the beginning of the marriage ceremony. It usually lasted a year (certainly no less except in the case of widows who were sometimes allowed to marry 30 days after the betrothal) and could be broken only by a legal decree of divorce-ment.

The betrothal act was celebrated by a feast after which the young man placed a ring on the finger of the bride-to-be. The ring was a token of fidelity (Gen. 41:42) and of her adoption into the groom's family (Luke 15:22). Although the bride continued to live in her father's house, she was regarded as already married—even though they were forbidden the privilege of consummating the espousal through sexual intercourse. Thus we find Joseph was called the "husband" of Mary, even though she was only his "espoused" wife (Luke 2:5).

During the 12 months the bride assembled her trousseau to prepare for housekeeping. The groom, during this time, was exempt from military service (Deut. 20:7, cf 24:5).

In Matthew 1:18-25 we have some insight into the betrothal of Mary to Joseph of Nazareth. Joseph is torn between two loyalties. One to his espoused wife, the other to the Jewish law. They had pledged themselves to sexual purity during the year of espousal. Now Mary is pregnant. Joseph, believing he had no recourse except to divorce his seemingly unfaithful fiancée, nevertheless tempers his justice with mercy and plans to give her a private divorce, rather than hold her up to public ridicule and perhaps death by stoning.

An angelic visitation, however, changes his mind. There is no indication when the actual marriage took place, although it must have been sometime after Jesus was born. (According to Luke 2:5 Mary was not yet married when she arrived in Bethlehem.) In any case, the wedding was never as important as the betrothal—for it was at that time the commitment was made.

The actual marriage ceremony was nothing more than the ratification to the espousal—with a blessing. The essence of the ceremony consisted of a great feast—called the "marriage supper"—where the bride, dressed in white linen to symbolize her purity, was the guest of honor. Following the marriage supper the bridegroom came for his bride and carried her to his father's house. (It is this ceremony which is so beautifully referred to in Revelation 19:7-9 concerning the second coming of the Lord Jesus for his bride, the church.) Thus, there was a literal truth in the Hebrew expression "to take a wife."

Does any of this have meaning for us today in our society of dating, romancing and "falling in love?" I believe it

does. If we as Christians are to survive in a society which places less and less emphasis on the spiritual aspects of the home, and almost no emphasis on preparation for marriage (unless it is a brief course in sex education), it is necessary for us to return to the principles of the betrothal for our own homes to stand when the high winds blow.

My friend, Costa Dier, foreign missions secretary at Elim Bible Institute, was born in Ramla in old Palestine. He talks of the old customs of the Middle East. There young men and women did not "date." That kind of contact only stirred their emotions and excited them sexually. Instead, they waited until they were ready to marry. Then, by an act of their will, they loved the one chosen by their parents.

In "Fiddler on the Roof," after 25 years of marriage, Tevye finally asks Golde, "Do you love me?"

He sings:

"The first time I met you was on our wedding day... but my father and my mother said we'd learn to love each other. Do you love me?"

Golde answers:

"For 25 years I've lived with him, fought with him, starved with him. For 25 years my bed is his: if that's not love, what is?"

We Westerners—especially we gentiles—know very little of that depth of love. We speak of falling in and out of love. But according to the Bible, love is something you do, not something you cannot help—like catching the flu.

Recently I was explaining this to our 14-year-old daughter. She asked, "You mean you could love any girl as much as you love me?"

I answered: "When your older sisters and brothers came along I loved them. But I did not love you then because I did not know you. You had not been born. When you arrived I willed myself to love you as much as I love them—because I wanted to."

I went ahead to explain how parents can love an adopted child just as much as one of their own—because they want to. In fact, my younger sister is adopted. She was not born of my mother and father. But I love her as much as I love my blood brothers, because I have willed myself to do so.

This is foreign to American thinking, because we have been conditioned to believe we should marry for "love." We have been conditioned to believe that we can't help it when we

"fall in love"—not realizing there is a vast difference between love and infatuation. Infatuation is an emotion—and it comes and goes. Love is an act of the will—and it abides forever.

That being the case, then, selection of God's mate for our lives should be made by seeking the will of God—and then, afterwards, we should will ourselves to love "till death do us part."

Is it possible, in our Western culture, where most young men and young women find their spouses through the process of dating and physical attraction, for the Biblical principles of betrothal to be applied? I believe it is. Parents should encourage dating basically for the purpose of fellowship and companionship—rather than emotional involvement. This will discourage "single dates" and strongly encourage double or group dates—which are fellowship-oriented rather than sexually-oriented.

While we live in a different culture than Abraham, the principles of the Bible remain the same. We are no longer desert nomads, wandering across the sands in search of a wife for our son. Now the land is full of potential wives (and husbands). Yet the principle of Christian parents helping in the selection remains the same.

A child who resents his parents' involvement in the selection process is at heart a rebellious child. The wise child not only appreciates, but expects his parents' supervision. For if the selection of a spouse should be based on God's will, not on the infatuation concept of having "fallen in love," then the experience and spiritual maturity of loving parents is absolutely necessary.

Once a young man hears from God who he is to marry, then by an act of his will he loves her more than any other woman in the world. It is not uncommon today to hear couples who have been married for a number of years confess that what they had in the beginning was not love—but infatuation. Nor is it uncommon to hear couples confess that after 20 years of marriage they have finally willed to love one another.

The betrothal—or engagement period—gives both the man and woman a chance to exercise that love so when they come together in marriage it can be fully consummated in the sexual relationship. Anything less is a cheap imitation.

In each case, of course, young people should be open to the leading

of the Holy Spirit. But in all cases, the Holy Spirit will never depart from the Biblical principles.

Two years ago my then 20-year-old daughter, Robin, began writing home from college that she had met a "wonderful Christian fellow." Her mother and I encouraged her to invite him to our home for a visit during the spring holidays. We liked Jon, and as we got to know him felt he could very well be God's choice for Robin as a husband.

The following summer he visited again — on our invitation. The night before he was to leave he pulled me aside. "Robin and I have grown very close," he said. "But I promised God I would not mention marriage to her until I talked to you."

"You want to ask me if you can marry Robin?" I asked.

"No sir," he said. "I want to ask your permission to ask Robin to marry me. If you say 'No', I will not ask her. She was yours long before she was mine. I'd like to wait a year so we can be ready for marriage. But if you agree, and she agrees, then our commitment now will be as binding as marriage itself."

I agreed. And so did Robin. The next night during a moonlit walk on the beach he slipped his mother's engagement ring on her finger and they entered into a betrothal as sacred as marriage itself.

There was yet one final step. The next day they drove down the coast of Florida to visit my father, Robin's grandfather, who was then 86 years old and confined to a wheelchair. They asked him to pronounce the patriarchal blessing — the betrothal service — while they stood at his bedside.

They waited the one year as they made preparations for marriage. Jon agreed he would not "take her" as his wife until he could support her. In the meantime, Robin was still my responsibility. But her life was betrothed to Jon, reserving only the act of living and sleeping together for that time when the marriage vows gave final approval.

I believe it is time to call the Body of Christ to a return to the meaning of the betrothal. The very structure of our homes is at stake. Pastors should consider engagement ceremonies. Young people should re-evaluate their goals: not to "fall in love" but to follow God's will. Parents should be far more active in helping their children hear from God concerning the choice of a

mate — and should not hesitate to begin early in that child's life to lead him or her in prayer on a regular basis for God's will in the matter of marriage.

Some will discover it is not God's purpose for them to marry. They will live celibate lives as "eunuchs for the Kingdom's sake." Others will wait — perhaps for years — before the proper choice for a spouse comes along. For all, however, there is a strong call from God to radically re-evaluate the concepts of preparation.

Christian homes are not limited to those raised in Christian homes. God

can take any home, no matter how broken, and turn it into a thing of beauty and purity. But how much better to lay the proper foundation, build deliberately, and when the time for the wedding comes, let it be simply a time of confirming what has already been done at the betrothal. ➤

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