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Spend A Lifetime - Together

**Even Christian marriages are increasingly torn by divorce.
Is there a formula which will encourage your marriage to last?**
by James McBride

Church calendars overflow with wedding appointments. Blushing brides daily adorn the feature columns of small towns and cities. The long-lived traditional marriage is still desired by most young people despite the so-called "sexual revolution". The "golden" or "diamond" anniversary celebrates solid achievement - and by any standard such marriages can be resounding successes.

Yet marriages continue to flounder. Divorce is at an appallingly high level - even among Christian partners. And the resulting anguish for children, parents, relatives and friends is lamentable. Marriages even of only short duration crack and fall apart. And at the other end of the age spectrum partners of long-standing part company via the divorce courts.

Why? Is there some basic fault with the very concept of marriage? Are we expecting too much, or not enough, from marriage? Or could it be that marriages are based on wrong foundational principles?

Dispassionate investigation of the traditional monogamous union confirms in the long run that it cannot be surpassed. When it "works" it really works. All the factors of stability, security, mutual support, love, personal fulfillment are the fabric of the ideal marriage. So what goes wrong? Why don't even half of all western marriage unions last a lifetime? Why do so many couples quit?

Let's look at some of those elements of marriage which give it a sure foundation. Let's look at some factors for success based on God's Word.

First, what about that highly extolled virtue *romantic love*?

Romantic Love

"In the beginning it seems as though the lights will never dim... Every silly, silly cliché seems to have been written just for you: mouths go dry, lights flash and life is as

supernaturally pretty as a chalk butterfly." That's how one psychologist describes the concept of romantic love. She continues, "Today it is considered more or less immoral to marry for any other reason".

It gives marriage a rosy glow. Every mundane task tackled together has a romantic aura. Washing up, decorating, shampooing the carpet, mending the burst water-pipe - all are enveloped in a haze of delight.

Alas, such ecstasy tends to fade. Ten years on, perhaps ten weeks, the romance is swamped in a morass of worldly cares. There's the realization that both partners have firmly entrenched personality traits that seem irreconcilable. Time, once your own, must now be shared with a growing family. Then there are your partner's special friends and interests, and what is often viewed as an unreasonable attachment to parents. There are differences of approach both religious and philosophical which before marriage endowed an air of mystery, but which later provoke contention and controversy. Financial constraints: reduced income, extra mouths, mortgage, keeping up with the neighbors, pensions - all increase the pressure. And, ultimately, there's the decay in outward physical appearance and abilities. So romance fades.

If *romance* is the sole binding strand then the reasons for staying together appear invalid. Once blissful hours in one another's company become dull and intolerable. Cracks can no longer be paved over. And many couples seek to recover the romance in a soap-opera style clandestine "affair". Indeed many marriage counselors encourage such "therapy"! The result? Before long, more often than not, the agony and trauma of divorce seems the only cure.

Many turn to the newspaper "agony aunts" for guidance. A thousand do-it-yourself marriage counseling books and tapes crowd the bookshop shelves. Perhaps most of those

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who see the impending crash of their marriages will clutch at such and for a time “work at it”. Indeed it’s widely recognized, and true, that even the best marriages need sustained effort to preserve them intact.

Often, though, the emphasis of such books is on *recapturing the romance* of marriage. All the worthy aids are promoted: the candle-lit meal, the bouquet of roses, the new dress or hair-style, the romantic night out, making yourself “more interesting”.

Romance, of course, ought to persist and be nourished in every marriage. It’s essential for all-round success, and marriage cannot thrive in its absence. But romance is the “icing on the cake”.

Let's look at some of the other factors vital to a successful marriage.

Mutual Support

An ancient wise saying extols the virtues of joint commitment and companionship. “Two are better than one” said King Solomon, “because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up. Again, if two lie together they are warm: but how can one be warm alone? And though a man prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him. A three-fold cord is not quickly broken” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12)

In the context of marriage the implications of this are clear. A husband and wife totally committed to one another can provide mutual support in times of stress, both from internal challenges and from without. A third strand, divine help or perhaps a child or the extended family, can increase the resilience of a growing family. So, when the inevitable illness strikes, or economic reverse (we all have our “winters”), the family can rally to provide material help and an emotional boost. Properly viewed, illness or economic adversity is a shared experience which in the family setting can bind and not destroy. Unlike mere co-habitation, there’s not the same temptation to “throw in the towel”.

Heart-rending disappointment stemming, for example, from the collapse of a mutually-cherished project can be smoothed and overcome by the combined resilience of two people in close harmony. And the interplay of minds united in common purpose can provide strong impetus towards the achieving of family goals or a shared vision. Two, indeed, are better than one!

Traditional marriage with its life-time commitment provides a contractual bond not possible in a more permissive arrangement. To encourage permanence, frail

human nature needs the framework of exchanged vows. And perhaps they should be written down, witnessed and signed! Without such a framework couples have a convenient bolt-hole to escape personal responsibility if they so wish when the going gets tough. As it inevitably will.

Companionship

True love and marriage is a partnership. It is companionship. In the first unveiling of the marriage bond God said “It is not good that a man should be alone” - an observation that belongs equally to women. Eve was created a companion for Adam. And vice versa. The husband is termed “the companion of her youth” (Proverbs 2:17) and the wife is “your companion and your wife by covenant” (Malachi 2:14). The Hebrew word for “companion” expresses a close personal relationship. In marriage a man and a woman are to become intimately united in body, purpose, thoughts, goals - “one flesh”.

Few marriages, sadly, implement this concept. All too often the idea of partnership, of companionship, of the combination of husband-wife mindpower, of a shared dream or vision is ignored and the union is impoverished. But when the marriage begins with the sure understanding that companionship is a vital pillar of the relationship, then this concept becomes a powerful force which encourages a permanent bond.

Every Christian man and woman considering marriage ought to thoroughly discuss with one another (and possibly with their pastor) this important principle. It must be up-front in their preparations for marriage. Then, when adversity strikes, they will understand that together they can share the misfortune, sustain the wounded spirit and gain the victory. The interplay of two minds united in common purpose is vital to overcome adversity.

Build A Dynasty

Romance, certainly, is a factor in a lasting and happy marriage. Mutual support and companionship are vital. But there’s a third factor which must have prime consideration even before a marriage begins. Indeed it must rank near the top of the list of priorities in a marriage covenant.

A most distressing aspect of marital breakdown is the vexed question of “division of property” (using the word in its wider sense). This includes, vitally, the welfare of the children. It includes the division of the previously shared home. It includes sharing chattels brought to the marriage from two family inheritances, and what was once termed “dowry”. It includes the redistribution and dispersal of the material goods to the next generation.

Such effects of divorce, however are not limited to the immediate and personal emotional distress of two people

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and their children. The hurt and distress and confusion ripples onward in ever-increasing circles to touch parents, grandparents, friends - and future generations.

Indeed the stability of a nation can as a result come under threat!

In titled families each generation takes pride in its inheritance, and in preserving it for future generations. They can trace their ancestry by clear lines on a genealogical chart and by family portraits to many generations past. They thrill to exhibit the family home and lands and heirlooms and proudly cite highlights of their history back to the early Colonial period - or even to the Conquest! They are part of an enduring dynasty. It imparts pride, status, security, authority and stability.

But divorce in the modern world dissipates family inheritance. Divorce divides family loyalties. It shatters the substance of a potentially sound building block of any society. Break up a home and creative energy is diverted from productive activity. The family suffers, the community suffers, the nation suffers.

On the other hand *you can build a dynasty*. By lifting your eyes beyond an introspective notion of romantic love or mere personal fulfillment. By consciously establishing your small family unit as a foundation stone of a future "house". By instilling in your family a pride of achievement and vision. By setting aside short-term desires and building now for the future. By these means you can build an enduring dynasty and your marriage will take on greater stability.

The idea is much neglected in our day. Yet anciently it was written into every godly marriage. So important is it that the Creator legislated detailed laws of inheritance when establishing His model nation of Israel some three thousand five hundred years ago.

Marriage can survive for a time on romantic love, but all too often and too soon that bubble bursts. An enduring marriage demands more substance. For an enduring, fulfilling marriage each couple must strenuously weave strong bonds of mutual interests and companionship. There ought to be a compassionate legal framework for the union. And essentially the guiding vision of combining two different historic human streams into a single mighty river flowing into the years ahead. An enduring dynasty.

An Added Dimension

But this is not the whole story. There is yet a further dimension to marriage that must not be omitted if success is to be achieved. For, to resolve the challenges that arise in marriage can at times require help that transcends human counseling abilities.

Because marriage is not merely a human institution.

There remains an element to marriage which alone imparts true stability and perspective.

For the Creator God instituted monogamous marriage. Does He have any say in who you should marry? Or even if you should? Is marriage simply one option among many? Ought you to marry outside your "race" - or your religion? Is God concerned about such ground-rules for marriage? What does He think of divorce? Is there any place for divorce as a "solution" to an unravelled Christian marriage? And are there inspired guidelines for solving the challenges of married life?

Future articles will address such questions.

Crash Course

In sum, if you want to spend a lifetime together

- Before marriage make sure you spend enough time getting to know our prospective life partner
- Always nourish the romance in your marriage
- Learn to share goals and interests
- Develop close bonds of companionship
- Focus on the long-term: build an enduring dynasty
- Be ready to work diligently for marriage success
- Ensure God is at the head of the marital table

You are invited to request the title *The Edge Of Divorce*. Any of the Churches of God elders will be pleased to counsel with you on any of these matters. They may be contacted through our various national addresses.

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