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The Marriage of the Parents

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The love relationship between father and mother is of the utmost importance for raising children. Indeed, it should have priority over the relationship with the children:

Children are only with their parents for a limited time, while the marriage is lifelong.

- Marriage is not defined by there being children.
- In their dealings with each other, the parents shape the values and manners of their children.
- Nothing hinders the development of the children more than a marriage that shatters.

1. Children are only with their parents for a limited time, while a marriage is lifelong

Under normal circumstances, the parents' marriage and relationship precede the birth of the children and "survive" the rearing of the children. Since in earlier centuries many mothers died giving birth to a child and many died early in life, the "survival" of children was certainly not as natural as it is today. Due to the low life expectancy of women, efforts were also made to have children as early as possible. But with today's life expectancy in the Western world, a normal married couple must reckon with the fact that for about half of the duration of the marriage, the adult children will have already left home – not to mention the time before the birth of the first child. Even with 5 children, the married couple can easily be alone for another 20 years, and with the smaller number of children that is common today, this period can even extend to 40 years!

Therefore, placing a priority on the investment in the parents' relationship over raising children is important for the preservation of the marriage. Otherwise, it can happen – and it does happens very often – that the children leave the house and the parents who remain have nothing more to say to each other because the children have become their purpose in life and the cement of the relationship.

As important, as beautiful, and as labor-intensive as raising children is, it must not become the glue that holds the marriage together. Invest at least as much in your relationship with your life partner as you do with your children!

Let your children know that the relationship with your spouse is more important. The children will not feel neglected. Rather, they will feel safe and secure.

2. Marriage is not defined by the presence of children

Through the marriage covenant – as well as through adoption – consanguinity (the same "flesh" in Old Testament terms) is established where it did not exist before. Two people who are not even related by blood and who grow up in very different environments are forged into an inseparable unit through marriage. The new kinship even surpasses the previous kinship bonds. In Genesis 2:24, marriage is defined by the fact that "a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife," and thereby man and wife will become "one flesh." Marriage thus surpasses the closest biological-blood relationship that exists, namely that of parents and children! It is obvious that the marital bond "is presented as stronger than the morally superior relationship between parents and children, which is so highly valued in the O. T."¹.

¹ Gustav Friedrich Oehler. *Theologie des Alten Testaments*. J. F. Steinkopf: Stuttgart, 1891³. pp. 230–231.

According to the creation account, marriage is the culmination of creation. After God had created everything (“And God saw that it was good,” Genesis 1:25), he created man and woman in a final step, intended for one another (Genesis 1:26–30), and only then did he determine that everything was “very good” (Genesis 1:31). At that time, there was already talk of offspring, but they did not yet exist – and yet everything, including marriage without children, was “very good”.

Through thousands of years, people have experienced and testified to the happiness of marriage, for example in the following statement by a 5th century Roman Christian near Bonn: “Here rests Meteriola, my dear wife, who shared with me many long, long years of toil and work, who was my wife for 23 years and was my sister in the Lord our God Jesus Christ, who may rest to show me my ways that I can follow.”²

But how does a marriage come about? First of all, what goes on in a man and a woman who get to know and love each other and finally enter into a marriage is a great mystery. Proverbs 30:18–19 makes this very beautifully clear: “*There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a maiden.*”

However, this very personal, to a certain extent inward side of marriage does not change the fact that marriage, like engagement, also has a legal and social side that can be grasped by the public. Dietrich Schneider defines love in general and thus also married love as follows: “‘Love’ means the relationship between persons, whereby the level of feeling (affection, voluntariness) and the legal side (fidelity, commitment) are equally important.”³ This fidelity and love are above all expressed through renunciation and sacrifice and are therefore the opposite of egoism and the pleasure principle. Jesus forewent in our favor to establish our covenant with God.

All this is the best prerequisite for raising children, but it also precedes the rearing of children. The covenant of marriage does not derive its meaning from the children but is the best prerequisite for children and their upbringing.

3. Sexuality has its value not only in procreation, but also in happiness and fulfilment

What applies generally to marriage also applies specifically to sexuality in marriage. Although it plays a central role in the miraculous procreation of offspring (e.g. Malachi 2:14–15), which God wants to give to the family, sexuality does not exhaust itself in this. Sexuality is also God’s creation and will if no children are conceived.

Sexuality first of all serves the happiness and fulfillment of the spouses and their love relationship. That marriage is a fully valid marriage even without children, indeed the relationship with the husband is of far greater importance than the question of childlessness or children, is made very beautifully clear by Elkana, the husband of Hannah, for he very much “loved” his

² Kurt Kleeman. Das Römische Museum Remagen. Rheinische Kunststätten 401. Neusser Verlag: Neuss, 1994. p. 21 (Inscription on one of the earliest Christian tomb slabs in the Rhineland from the 5th century, found in Remagen, today in the Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn); cf. the Latin version and the commentary in Helga Hemgesberg. „Die frühchristliche Meteriola-Inschrift aus Remagen“. Bonner Jahrbücher 186 (1986): 299–313.

³ D. Schneider. „Liebe“ [“Love”]. S. 240–243 in: Fritz Grünzweig et al (eds.). Brockhaus Wörterbuch. R. Brockhaus Verlag: Wuppertal, 1982, here pp. 240–241.

childless wife (1 Samuel 1:5) and asked her: “*Don’t I mean more to you than ten sons?*” (1 Samuel 1:8).

The fact that sexuality is a creation of God and is intended to please the spouses is above all made clear in the Song of Songs, which does not mention children at all. In the Song of Songs 5:10–16, for example, the girl describes her lover, who alone is “outstanding among ten thousand” to her. Solomon also praised and sang about married sexuality in other passages. Ecclesiastes 9:9 says: “*Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun— all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun.*” In Proverbs 5:15–20, such a call is even more clearly expressed and combined with the warning against extramarital sexuality: “*Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well. Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares? Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers. May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer – may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love. Why be captivated, my son, by an adulteress? Why embrace the bosom of another man’s wife?*” In all these places there is no mention of children anywhere!

If sexuality and procreation were inseparable, sexuality would have to stop at the latest when a couple has enough children, or even more so when the woman is too old to become pregnant or when one of the two partners is infertile. However, the thought of marriage without sexuality is unthinkable in the Bible (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:1–6; 1 Timothy 4:1–5). Rather, it says: “*Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun – all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun*” (Ecclesiastes 9:9). For this reason, Christian pastoral care always interprets marital crises in living out sexuality to be a sign of a fundamental crisis of marriage in general. In 1 Corinthians 7:3–4, Paul clearly writes: “*The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife’s body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband’s body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife.*” This text also makes it unmistakably clear that sexuality should not only please the husband but that the Bible is quite aware of sexual equality. This is due to the fact that both spouses do not belong to themselves but to the other – also and especially in the area of sexuality.

4. The importance of the parents’ marriage for shaping the children

Nothing hinders the development of the children more than a marriage that is shattering, for it is through their interaction with each other that the parents shape the values and social manners of their children.

Even those who want to give child-rearing priority over marriage should invest in the parents’ love relationship for the sake of child-rearing! This is due to the fact that there is hardly anything that has a more negative influence on the development of children than the breaking up of a marriage and a divorce. Therefore, investment in the relationship of the spouses must take precedence over everything else!

Children learn by concrete example how to deal with each other. The central values of our life are not primarily taught in the family through “lectures” but through visual instruction.

However, nothing confuses children more than the lack of unity and common values on the part of their parents. This does not mean that parents automatically have to agree with each other, but rather that in many discussions they determine which values they want to stand up for and show themselves to be looking for the best path for their children.

As a spouse, take the time to talk in detail about raising your children. Talk to each other until you feel that you have understood each other's concerns. This will be good for both your relationship and result in better decisions for your children. Of course, these conversations are not only important for raising children but for all areas of life.

Don't let your children divide you from each other, neither in principle nor in terms of concrete parenting decisions. Parents may have different opinions. Children may know that the parents' decision is the result of a discussion – they should learn this for their own lives – but in the end there must be a clear decision for the children. If you disagree with your spouse's decision, do not discuss it in front of your children, but in private with your partner. If you then change your mind together, you can tell and explain this to your child. But if you criticize or even “rail against” your spouse in front of the children, the children soon no longer know who is actually the child and who is the parent! By the way, it will also be good for your marriage if the partners know that the other partner is not going to criticize them publicly, but that he or she is looking for a conversation first.

5. Dealing with sexuality is shaped by values

The fact that our interaction with each other as parents shapes the values of the children also and especially applies to sexuality. Psychology has long since provided extensive statistics to show how strongly sexuality is inherited from generation to generation. This applies to positive elements as well as negative ones. Thus, women who often experience a fulfilling orgasm usually have mothers who have experienced the same. And, shockingly, sexual abuse is also “inherited,” such that the victims are more likely than average to become perpetrators themselves later.

We have already seen that Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:3–4 demands equal rights in sexual intercourse between spouses or considers it a logical consequence of the nature of marriage. This equality also makes it clear that sexual intercourse with one another is determined to a large extent by the values of husband and wife. According to 1 Thessalonians 4:1–8, the husband is responsible to win his wife in a way that is honorable, especially in the sexual area, and to win the dignity of the wife in a way that does not offend. According to 1 Peter 3:7, the man should treat his wife in a courteous and respectful manner, especially in the area of sex so that God will even at all answer his prayers.

The fact that sexual intercourse with each other is determined by values means that the children's values are also significantly influenced, regardless of how much they actually experience. Many studies have shown that children as adults deal with the opposite sex in the same way as they have learned at home, even in the area of sex, and surprisingly also and especially when they have not noticed any explicit sexual acts.

All this does not mean, of course, that children are only a by-product of marriage. The exhortation to “*be fruitful and increase in number*” in Genesis 1:28 (directed at Adam and Eve) and “*be fruitful and increase in number*” in Genesis 35:11 (directed at Jacob) makes it clear that under normal circumstances marriage is designed for children (cf. Exodus 1:7; Isaiah 48:18–19). It is considered a blessing, as when Job “saw his children and their children to the fourth generation” (cf. Job 42:16). In the Bible, church growth always begins with the people

of God increasing in size through multiplication. God created sexuality as a wonderful means of producing children who learn God's love and law in God-fearing families. In Malachi 2:14–15, descendants are described as a natural God-given goal of the marriage covenant: *“It is because the Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, ... she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring.”*