

WEDDING WORDS

There are three aspects of proceedings on a wedding day and **words** are important in all of them:

CELEBRATION, CEREMONY, and CENTRING.

CELEBRATION:

- “marking a significant time or event with a social gathering or enjoyable activity.”

In the celebration of a marriage the exchange of happy **words** takes much of the time. It would not be much of a celebration if people attending were not allowed to say anything.

CEREMONY:

- “an act performed according to traditional or prescribed form.”

Some people say, “Why bother with a wedding ceremony? It’s just a piece of paper.” But the “piece of paper” (the wedding certificate) is not the heart of the ceremony. Rather it records that the ceremony is valid because particular **words** that are necessary to the commitment of marriage have been said.

It is in the saying of those prescribed **words** that marriage is entered into, so that when those **words** have been said, the person officiating can say, “I now pronounce them man and wife”.

CENTRING:

- “the action or process of placing things in the centre.”

Along with the prescribed **words** of the ceremony and the informal **words** of celebration are the things that are done and said from choice on the day to express how the lives of the husband and wife are being centred, placed together, while surrounded by friends and family. It is like the two of them being placed into a circle, for them to show by what is being done, how they want people to relate to them from that point onwards, and so to replace previous ways of relating to them as individuals.

Words are chosen to express that centring of these lives together.

(A further interesting thought on centring is that in architecture it means “the framing used to support an arch or dome under construction”. So we could see those attending the wedding and the proceedings as there to provide a framework for the two to be joined together, after which the framework can be removed leaving the married couple as a permanent structure.)

What follows is part of **CENTRING** based on some basic instructions for marriage in the Bible. I will explain two Bible **words** – one which is generally not much liked, and the other which is liked. Both of these **words** are easily misunderstood.

The words are:

SUBMISSION and LOVE

I will deliberately quote **part** of what is said about these words, and leave the other part of the quotation until later.

“Wives, **submit yourselves** to your own husbands.” (Ephesians 5v22)

“Husbands **love** your wives” (Ephesians 5v25)

SUBMISSION

Particular words have associations for us based on our previous use of them. That can confuse our understanding of those words when used in a different context.

For me, the word submission brings two things to mind:

Firstly, in the 1960s when I was a teenager, I would go to a friend's house on Saturday afternoons to watch the wrestling on TV. Before each match the announcer would say, "2 falls, 2 **submissions** or a knock-out to decide the winner".

This does not give us an accurate indication about the intended submission in a marriage relationship!!

Secondly, more recently, having written a commentary on Luke for children and adults, I have been involved in the **submission** of my manuscript to potential publishers to see if it acceptable to them. The relationship of wife to husband is not meant to be one in which she has to be constantly seeking his approval.

We therefore have to see how the words **submit / submission** are used in the Bible in order to correctly understand the instruction. If we look at how a particular word is used in different places in the Bible, we will find that they either show that it is used the same way each time, giving a clear precise meaning, or that the word has a variety of meanings which are made clear by the context.

The New Testament Greek word ὑποτάσσω (hupotasso) is the word which is translated "to submit" and means "to set in order under".

- It is used of Jesus to his parents, describing the relationship of a child to a parent (Luke 2v51). It is not appropriate in a marriage relationship for the husband to take the role of a father figure and for the wife to relate as his child.

- It is used of the reaction of evil spirits to Jesus' disciples on a mission (Luke 10v17).

In this case it is about the response to the exercise of power over them. A wife's submission to her husband is not about him having power over her.

- It is used of the relationship of a citizen to government (Romans 13v1).

The husband is not the rule-maker for his wife.

- It is used of employee or servant to employer/boss – where the employee does what is decided by their boss (1Peter 2v18).

The husband is not the decision-maker for his wife.

- It is used of younger people in their relationship to their elders in recognising their greater experience and wisdom (1Peter 5v5).

The husband does not have greater wisdom than his wife in all things!!

We can see that these uses of the word **submission** do not indicate what it means for a wife to submit to her husband. The reason why some marriages are unhappy or fail may well be found in the acceptance or imposition of such a **wrong** submission in the relationship.

So, what is envisaged when the instruction is given for a wife to submit to her husband? Here is where we need to complete the quotation:

"Wives submit to your own husbands as to the Lord." (Ephesians 5v22)

"As his people are in submission to Jesus, so wives to their own husbands in everything" (Ephesians 5v24)

So the picture of how a wife relates to her husband is that of how people who are in relationship with Jesus relate to him.

Here are three things about such a relationship:

1. It is a freely chosen happy decision to be associated permanently with him.

When a person commits their life to Jesus, it is that kind of relationship they are entering. In marriage, a similar decision is being freely made.

There is a great difference between imposed and chosen submission.

On a visit to my dentist, I found that the local one had retired and been replaced by a young man from London. Having asked about me and the work I did, he told me that he was a Muslim. He then began to engage me in conversation which was difficult for me to contribute to as he was working on my teeth at the time. He said that he was interested in Christianity and had read the Bible. He then said, "I have worked out the difference between Islam and Christianity." I was intrigued by what his view would be, and he went on, "The difference is, Islam is about submission and Christianity is about choice."

The submission of wife to husband being advocated in the Bible is not a submission imposed by the husband and therefore has none of the negatives that can be associated with such a relationship.

2. The right submission involves an adjustment of one's pace and direction to walk alongside the other.

When a person begins to live in relationship with Jesus, their lifestyle changes to express that relationship. In a similar way, that which has been a single person's lifestyle changes in marriage to be alongside the person she has married. There is someone to take into consideration in decisions being made.

To submit means to be set in order under, or in this context, to place yourself close up to.

I find this illustration useful: When I was in Boys' Brigade doing marching, the first command was "Marker, take post!" then the others lined up next to him. The "marker" had the responsibility to set the right pace and direction and thus made it easy for the others to be where they were meant to be. The marker did not give orders, they did the same as the others, but they were the reference point of togetherness.

In marriage – (as in marching in the Boys Brigade!!), it may take some time to learn to "walk together", but after a while the process is "built in" and becomes invisible.

3. The relationship of those committed to Jesus is an all-inclusive relationship.

Similarly, the relationship of those committed in marriage is all-inclusive.

When people are called into relationship with Jesus – everything comes into that.

There is not separate work/ leisure/ home/ friendships/ family to which is added "relationship to Jesus". Rather, all those areas of life come into and are affected by that relationship.

So it is with marriage – everything is changed by two people getting married.

It is like marriage being a circle into which every other element of life is placed - work/ leisure/ home/ friendships/ family. All aspects of life are affected by the new marriage relationship.

From the guidance for the wife, we move on to the word given to the husband:

LOVE

"Husbands love your wives" (Ephesians 5v25)

LOVE is a very widely used and much misused word.

Prince Charles, when being interviewed at the time of his engagement to Diana was asked "Can you find the words to sum up how you feel today?" He said it was difficult to find the words then said,

"Just delighted and happy. I'm amazed that she's been brave enough to take me on."

Interviewer: "And I suppose in love"

Diana: (speaking quickly and clearly) "Of course!"

Charles: (after a moment's pause) "Whatever 'in love' means, you have to put your own interpretation.

Interviewer: It obviously means two very happy people.

The instruction to husbands to love their wives is not left so vague:

“Husbands love your wives even as Jesus loved his called-out people and gave himself - handed himself over for them – on their behalf.” (Ephesians 5v25)

This meant crucifixion for Jesus – it does not mean the same for a husband! A husband’s love will never be the **same** as Jesus’ love. But there are ways in which a husband’s love for his wife can be **like** Jesus’ love towards his people.

Here are three characteristics of Jesus’ love which give an example for husbands to follow:

1. It is a **servicing** love

Jesus said that he came not to be served but to serve. (Matthew 20v28)

At the time about which it is said that “having loved those who were his own, he loved them to the fullest extent”, the writer describes how Jesus surprised his disciples by taking the place of a servant to wash their feet.

Some lovely words from a hymn I came across recently describe it in this way.

“mercy seat” is a phrase used of a meeting place with God)

“We strain to glimpse your mercy seat,

and find you kneeling at our feet.” (from: Great God, your love has called us here : Brian Wren)

Learning from this, a husband’s love for his wife in serving her is to bring to her life that which will bless her and help her to be everything she can be.

2. It is a **sacrificial** love

It cost Jesus to give himself for the best interests of others, and it likewise means for a husband that there will be restrictions in his life because of his commitment to his wife’s happiness.

But such sacrifice need not be an unhappy sacrifice.

It is written of Jesus that “for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame” (Hebrews 12v2)

One dictionary definition of sacrifice is: “an act of giving up something of value for the sake of something that it of greater value or importance.”

When submission and serving sacrificial love is put into practice it might cause arguments!!!

Husband to wife: We have a decision to make.

Wife: Well I’ll do what you think is best, because I want to be in step with you.

Husband: No, I want to do whatever is best for you, so what do you say?

Wife: I am happy to go along with whatever you would like.

Husband: But I am happy not to do what I would like, but what you would like.....etc.

The disciple Peter had a similar problem when Jesus came to wash his feet. At first he found it difficult to receive, but learned that submission meant allowing someone to love him. (John 13v6-9)

3. It is an **adventurous ambitious** love

In describing Jesus’ love for his people, “even as Jesus loved his called-out people” the writer goes on to describe Jesus’ wonderful intentions for and with those who are in relationship with him. (Ephesians 5v25-27)

The guidance for a new husband is to look ahead and go for the fulfilment of what begins on the wedding day.

When I was at Bible College we had a course about leadership and management. It was pointed out that the reason some organisations fail is that having set a goal and then achieved it, they fail to set new goals to be pursued. It was mentioned as an aside that the

same applies to personal relationships. The reason that many fail is that they start out with a clear goal (e.g. the goal of getting married) which is then achieved. So much focus has been on that one goal that once it is achieved people can lose their way if they fail to look ahead and plan together for new horizons.

At the time of writing, I have been married for nearly 35 years and my wife and I have a motto which stays with us. It is:

“Ever further along the road, and always beginning again”

Some people wrongly see getting married as a last goal to be achieved, the place to “settle down” after all other youthful ambitions have been fulfilled, with the idea that from the wedding day life is downhill from there on. But rather, from the day of the wedding, the mountaineering adventure can now begin!

In conclusion, some avoid or don't like marriage because it looks like the loss of two identities into one. There is the thought that both have to lose something of who they are in order to form this new unit, thus giving up who they formerly were.

But rather, if the Biblical advice is followed, then:

- the **husband** has someone who has freely chosen to be permanently alongside him, and to walk in step with him – so his identity is strengthened.
- the **wife** has someone who will serve her and seek her best interests – to be her bodyguard – so her identity is strengthened.

Then another identity also comes into existence – that of **their togetherness**

So the 2 are not lost into 1, rather the 2 become 3.

There is **her** vision and calling.

There is **his** vision and calling.

There is **their** vision and calling.

Attention is to be given to all three, but not by trying to keep them all in balance.

It won't work to say, “We have 12 hours today so we will give 4 hours to my vision and calling, 4 hours to yours and 4 hours to our joint vision and calling.”

To see how it can work, picture if you can a 3 sided see-saw. Then let the picture become somewhat surreal by picturing husband on one end, wife on the second end and husband and wife together on the third end.

At any time (it could be a day/ week/ month or season) one side of the see-saw will be down as that part of vision and calling is being given prominence. Then that part needs to be let go (like the person pushing up their end of a see-saw) in order to give attention to one of the other two. It is important to see that all three should be given attention, and particularly in the first year of marriage the new joint vision and calling should be given time to develop.

The importance of this is seen in guidelines given in the Old Testament:

“If a man has recently married, he must not be sent to war or have any other duty laid on him. For one year he is to be free to stay at home and bring happiness to the wife he has married” (Deuteronomy 24v5). A strong joint vision and calling will help the distinctive individual responsibilities and giftings in life to be fulfilled at the right time.

Life can be complicated and circumstances can make it difficult to give attention to some things at the time we would choose. A good way of avoiding potential tension is to follow the advice of a friend, Ray Mayhew who advised, “It is okay to borrow time from your family if you need to, as long as you remember to pay it back!”

So, submission and love and a three sided see-saw are a way to blessing in a marriage as husband and wife seek each other's fulfilment and discover and pursue the new vision and calling of their togetherness.

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