

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

"Resolving Conflicts in Marriage (1)"

Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma

*June 13, 2004; No. 3206*

Dear radio friends,

Today the Reformed Witness Hour has a special guest, probably well known to many of us: Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma of the Kalamazoo Protestant Reformed Church. Pastor Bruinsma recently spoke at a marriage conference on the topic of "Resolving Marital Conflict." We are going to air today the first half of his message.

We have him with us and thought we would ask him a few questions to whet our appetite for the message.

Q: "Pastor Bruinsma, welcome to the Reformed Witness Hour. What have you found, as a pastor, to be a primary cause of conflict in marriage?"

A: "It's not only sin but pride. In fact, in the speech that will be aired, we are going to emphasize that fact as well — that we all have within us a sinful flesh. And within that sinful flesh is found pride. It is easy for us, even as children of God, to become bitter and resentful toward others. Those kinds of things can build up within a marriage and often times cause conflict between a husband and a wife."

"That is probably the main cause of conflict. There are a lot of little things that can arise in marriage that can cause problems but it is basically a sin or pride problem."

Q: "That is so very true. And I'm sure that every child of God who is married has to acknowledge that. What, then, about some remedies against this terrible self-centeredness that we find in ourselves?"

A: "We have the fruit of the Spirit within us as God's children. Those fruit of the Spirit must be actively put on by the child of God. He must exercise himself in meekness and humility,

kindness and gentleness, and that applies not only in general to everyone, but especially within the relationship of marriage. We must find within us that work of Jesus Christ where He Himself shows us the way to meekness and to kindness. And we have to deal with our spouses in that way, too. Especially humility and meekness where we put our spouses before ourselves and give of ourselves to them.”

### **Here is the first half of Pastor Bruinsma’s message on Resolving Marriage Conflict.**

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Whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God. That is a principle found in I Corinthians 10:31, which is *the* one guiding principle in the life of every child of God. It is the guiding principle that we use in the thoughts that we think, the words that we speak, the places that we go, and the things that we do. It is also *the* one guiding principle that guides us in all of our relationships, including that of marriage.

That is true of us in a couple of different ways. We know that marriage is an institution of God that He ordained already at the beginning of time, and when we enter into the marriage state we are honoring God by honoring that institution itself.

But there is another way that marriage is God-glorifying. That is marriage itself. God has meant marriage, as an institution, to reflect that marriage between Jesus Christ and His church, so that in a very real way, when a man and a woman enter into the marriage bond, it is an earthly and no doubt limited picture of that unbreakable bond that exists between Christ (the Bridegroom) and His church (the bride). That relationship is expressed to us beautifully in various passages of the Scripture, perhaps none better than in Ephesians 5. We read in verses 22-24 of that chapter: “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.” It cannot be said

better: Marriage reflects the relationship, between Christ and the church. When a man and a woman, more importantly, when a *believing* man and a *believing* woman enter into that bond, they know as well that it was ordained by God to reflect that. When we honor marriage, we are glorifying the name of God.

But if all of that is true, and it is, then that also must be the goal of marriage. If it is the purpose of marriage, then it is also the goal of marriage. How can we together as a husband and a wife bring glory to the name of our God? I know that there are other principles that guide marriage. Yet, all of those principles really are rooted in this one principle of Scripture — that in our marriages we bring glory to the name of our God.

For example, as we will be considering in a few moments, one of the principles of a good and godly marriage is that a husband and a wife must always give to one another and look out for the welfare, joy, and happiness of their spouse. The question is, Why? Why must they always give for one another? The answer is: In order to glorify the name of God. For even as Christ gave Himself for His bride, the church, so also we know that we glorify the name of our God by always giving of ourselves to our spouse. But all of these find their source in that love that we have for God and the work of grace that has been worked in our hearts.

There are many people who enter into marriage today in a very selfish way and want to find out what they can get out of marriage for themselves rather than what they can give to their spouse. In that way they fail to glorify the name of God. It is no wonder that there are so many marriages that end up in trouble today. The believer knows his calling: I glorify my God in my marriage and in my relationship with my husband and with my wife. And I glorify God in another way, too. I know, because God tells me very clearly in His Word (Mal. 2:16), “For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away.” And if He hates putting away — literally, if God hates divorce — then I hate divorce too. And I know that I bring glory to my God by hating divorce as He hates that.

So there are many different ways that the child of God glorifies the

name of God by entering into marriage as an unbreakable bond. But there is a problem that enters into marriage. Sin. And sin is no little problem, because sin is that which causes conflict in marriage. Conflict is not God-glorifying.

I say that, because there are those who take the attitude that since there is going to be conflict in marriage anyway, conflict must be just a natural part of marriage. And it is not really all that serious of a problem. The important thing is that we stay together. Whether we find joy and happiness in that marriage does not really matter. There is going to be conflict anyway, so, if you are going to fight, you fight.

That is not true. God purposes in marriage that a man and a woman live together in peace and harmony and happiness with one another. Only that kind of relationship of peace and harmony properly reflects the relationship of Christ and His church and properly, therefore, glorifies the name of our God. All conflict in marriage is sin. From those little spats that a husband and a wife might have with each other, to the more serious arguments that they might have, it is all sin that needs to be repented of.

Having said that, however, I must also say this: Conflict in marriage is inevitable. It is so because in marriage two sinners are bound together by God. None of us is free of sin. And sin is what gives rise to conflict in marriage. There are disagreements that arise between a husband and a wife. In fact, it is a wonder that God, almost miraculously, takes two incompatible sinners and makes them one flesh, and then, by His grace, causes them to live together in that peace and that joy which is necessary for marriage.

Sad, to say, pastoral work in this whole area of conflict in marriage has increased in the church today. More and more couples come to pastors and elders and want them to resolve a very serious conflict and separation that has developed in their marriage. It is not as if pastors or elders do not want such couples to come to them and to speak to them concerning their problems. They certainly are desirous to help them as much as possible in those difficulties. Yet, nevertheless, that conflict has escalated to this point today in the

church is not a good sign. It is not because we, who have been blessed with the Word of God and who have been richly blessed by the work of God's grace in our hearts, ought to have the spiritual common sense, the spiritual wisdom, to know how to deal with conflict and disagreement in marriage when it raises its ugly head.

It is that which I wish to address at this time: Resolving marriage conflict.

There is no doubt about it, that in order to resolve conflict in marriage, it is necessary for us to understand what causes the conflict. As we said at the outset, conflict and strife in marriage is due to sin — sin in us. Even we, as redeemed members of the church of Jesus Christ, have sin in us. But there is one chief characteristic of that sin that sticks out because of that old man of sin within us. And that is pride. Pride is the opposite of humility — the very opposite. Humility is that virtue of thinking about someone else before I think about myself. It is seeking the needs, the desires of someone else as more important than my own desires and my own needs. It is doing something for someone else before doing something for myself. In fact, humility is much like meekness (another virtue that is worked in the heart of the child of God). Meekness is esteeming another more highly than myself. Humility is the ability to take wrong and to suffer ourselves to be defrauded, as the apostle Paul speaks of in I Corinthians 6:7.

Pride is just the opposite of that. It is being arrogant and assertive. It is seeing oneself and one's own needs as being more important than someone else's desires and needs. It is always wanting my own way. It is that which makes us "thin-skinned," rather quickly offended by what someone else says or does, going on the defensive in attempting to protect oneself over against the other. It is never allowing someone to do us wrong without retaliating. It is that pride that enters into the various relationships in life — parent/child relationships, relationships with friends, relationships with fellow saints in the church. Pride is a horrible thing. Pride especially reveals itself in the relationship of a husband and a wife. All we need to do is examine our own hearts a little bit in that regard, and we will see that it is usually those who are the

closest to us that are the objects of our own pride and our own sin.

Since marriage is such an intimate bond between a man and a woman, then it is right there, in that very close relationship, that pride rears itself.

There is something that we ought to be aware of when we consider this whole idea of pride. Pride is that which makes all kinds of excuses for itself. That is in the very character of pride. In other words, there are so many excuses that we can come up with in our pride. The character of pride is that my pride hides itself from me so that when I am wronged by others, my pride says, "I am right, they are wrong. Therefore, I have a right to say anything or do anything. I don't care if it hurts them or not, because I'm right and they're wrong." That is pride.

Or, "You know, I am always doing something for someone else. It's time that I do something for myself. After all, how does the saying go — I'm worth it." Or, "I'm sick of always being picked on. I think it is time that I stand up for myself now. I'll show him that I can stand up to him too."

All kinds of excuses, you know. That is the very character of pride. I do not see it so quickly in myself. I might see it in someone else, but not so quickly in my own self. It is that pride that likes to hide itself, that is the root cause for all conflict in marriage. There may be other causes, I am not denying that. But pride is the root cause.

Pride presents itself in several distinct ways in marriage relationships. First of all, sin and pride seek to ignore and even rebel against the particular roles that God has given to a husband and wife in marriage. Pride does that. A husband, in his pride, will oftentimes take his role as the head in the home and turn it into being a tyrant in the home. That is pride, the old man of sin in us. Rather than being a good head who loves and cherishes and leads and guides his wife in the way that she ought to go in a very caring way, he becomes a tyrant and makes demands of his wife and of his family that are not a part of being a true, godly head.

Wives, on the other hand, because of pride, will not submit to their husbands. Instead they will rebel against their husbands. We ought to realize that God has set us in these roles in the marriage relationship (as head and being in submission to that head) in order to give us joy and happiness in that relationship. But one, and oftentimes both, of those partners will step outside of their roles in marriage and think that they have a better way to go than God Himself has prescribed for them in marriage. And the first thing you know is that they end up in strife and quarreling and bitterness, which leads to resentment.

There is another way that pride shows itself in the marriage relationship. Since marriage is a covenant bond that exists between a husband and a wife, there are certain ways that husbands and wives are called to interact in a marriage. Not only is there this role of headship and of submissiveness, but a covenant relationship is a relationship of friendship. And that requires of a husband and a wife to dwell together with each other as friends. Now, I realize that that term in Scripture (being one flesh with each other) has all kinds of implications. But one of the practical implications of that term "one flesh" is that the husband and the wife dwell together as one. They dwell together as friends with one another. In fact, best friends. Their life, as a husband and a wife, must be totally wrapped up in each other. They must be there for each other. And they must be in the home for each other.

Secondly, this covenant of marriage requires, as all friendship does, communication with each other. Friends are those who enjoy one another's fellowship. They walk together and they talk together and they cry together and they laugh together and they share their secrets with one another, all of their disappointments, all of their joys, as a part of being a friend, a part of communicating with one another. In short, a husband and a wife ought to be those who desire to be with each other more than with anyone else.

Marriage, in order to bring true peace and joy and harmony, requires that of a husband and a wife.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

"Resolving Conflicts in Marriage (2)"

Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma

*June 20, 2004; No. 3207*

Dear radio friends,

Once again we have a special guest with us, the Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma. The last message was the first half of his speech delivered at a recent marriage conference on resolving marital conflict. We are thankful to have him with us again today for the second half of his message.

We thought we would ask him a few questions about the second half of his message.

Q: "Pastor Bruinsma, you are going to be emphasizing in this half especially the need for Christian couples to be reading the Word of God together, for it is in the Word of God that all the answers are to be found. What do you think are some of the reasons why the reading of the Bible is not practiced as commonly as it used to be?"

A: "In the past, it seems that especially those who were church-goers saw it as a necessity in their lives to sit down with each other as a husband and wife and with their children and to have family devotions together. In fact, at times they would even call that 'family worship.' The Word of God played a very central role in the family. They would set aside certain times. It is perhaps a Dutch tradition that at the time of our meals we read and pray with one another and discuss the Word of God together. I think that is a good practice — something that was very common in the past. We do not find that as much today. I think that presents a real danger and a threat, not only to husbands and wives, but to families. I think that it is absolutely necessary, if we are going to understand our roles as husbands and wives and as children and parents in the home, that we read the Word of God together. I think that often times we become far, far too busy in our lives to do that. We often times do not even sit down and eat together (a very convenient time to read and pray together). But we also find ourselves involved in so many activities that take us outside of the home and family. I think that we have to reassess our lives and set aside a time during the day to read the Word of God together, because that is what is going to guide us in our marriages."

Q: "In the message you are going to present today, you are going to be emphasizing

the need for husbands and wives to repent before each other. What happens if one is not repentant, walks in a rebellious way, and perhaps is not even a true child of God? What would be the recourse, then, of the person in the marriage who is desirous to repent while the other is not?"

A: "That is a rather difficult question to answer because of the varied situations that might arise in that regard. But I believe that even if my spouse does not wish to repent and I do, I must still repent of my own sin and my own error. It does not depend on whether the other repents or not. If it truly happens that they walk in unbelief and do not repent, then their sin is going to be upon their own shoulders. If they remain, so be it. I still live with them (as a wife) in submission or (as a husband) show proper leadership in the home and do that for the sake of Jesus Christ. To the degree that I do that personally, to that degree there will be relative peace in the home."

"And, probably, by God's mercy, it is the one spouse's repentance that is going to have the most powerful effect upon the other, to bring him or her to repentance as well."

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The covenant of marriage, finally, requires what we mentioned earlier: giving. The husband must always give of himself, of his time, of his love, of his advice, of his instruction, of his guidance, of his consolation to his wife.

Likewise the wife must always be giving of herself to her husband, always seeking to please him before pleasing herself. That is humility, that is love, that is friendship, that is the covenant bond of marriage. And that is what glorifies God in marriage. A spouse is always required in marriage to give to the other. The more that that is done, the happier the relationship.

But when pride enters into that relationship, then he or she or both become selfish. They think about self before they think about their spouse. Pride says this (on the part of a husband): "I would rather be out with my buddies and having a good time with my buddies than spending time with my wife." And the wife: "I would rather be out with the ladies tonight. If my husband is going to have a night out, I should have a night out as well and go have a good time."

Now, I am not saying that a husband and a wife may not do those kinds of things. It happens at times. I am saying, would I rather be out with them having a good time

than being at home with my wife or husband? Which would I rather do? Pride says I would rather be out with someone else. Pride says, “I’m too tired to communicate. I don’t feel like talking. I’d rather kick my shoes off, bury my nose in a newspaper, or watch football on TV or get on the phone with my friends, or monkey around on the computer all night long — and not sit and talk with my spouse.” Pride says, “I’ve given enough. It’s time that they give to me. I deserve a little bit more attention and I’m tired of always giving to them. It’s their turn now to give to me in this relationship. So I’m going to go out and do something for myself.”

In other words, it is in our sinful flesh to be self-centered — to think about me rather than think about my spouse. Then we begin to view marriage, the institution of marriage, as a means, as a way of gratifying ourselves. I enter marriage because I expect this for me out of marriage. As soon as I do not get what I want out of marriage, then I become angry and resentful. And anger and resentment feeds on itself. I’m right in this situation, that is all there is to it, and I do not have to apologize. I do not have to say I’m sorry. And I’ll do one of two things: either I’ll storm out of the house and go somewhere else so I don’t have to think about that, or I won’t say a word, but walk around the house in silence so my spouse can see that I’m angry. Who has not done this?

This conflict, if not repented of, often times gives rise to another conflict, and then to another conflict, and then to another conflict, and another disagreement, and another argument. We never apologize to each other, never say, “I’m sorry, I was wrong.” But one argument, one conflict, piles up upon another one, until finally there is a whole list. (And we’re really good at keeping lists, aren’t we?) There’s this whole list of wrongs that my spouse has done against me. And all of them stand now in the way of reconciliation with one another. Then, over time, sins against one another become so many that it is as if we just simply do not trust, or love, or even want to be with that person anymore.

It is pride. That is really what it comes down to: pride. That is what ruins this relationship of peace and harmony between a husband and a wife. The way to resolve conflicts — all conflicts — is clear: swallow your sinful pride and live in humility one with another. That’s how you resolve conflict in the marriage.

Now I realize that these passages talk about conflict in general and can be applied to any relationship in life. Nevertheless, let us hear what the Bible says: “Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves” (Phil. 2:3). Does not that apply to marriage? Or the passage

in Ephesians 4:26, 27, “Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: Neither give place to the devil.” Does not that apply to the marriage relationship? It more than certainly does! Romans 15:5, “Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus.” Ah, yes, how about the passage in I Corinthians 13:4-7, “Charity (and charity is love in action) suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up (there you have the pride issue), Doth not behave itself unseemly (and that is exactly what marriage conflict does not), seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.” (Maybe that passage is something that every family ought to have somewhere hanging in the house.) There is the answer right there. Our calling in resolving conflict in marriage is: be humble and put on the love that is found in Jesus Christ.

You might say, “You know, what you are saying, Rev. Bruinsma, is all right. But it is so general! We need a set of rules or a list of steps that we can follow one by one by one and, voila! we have solved the marriage conflict. Give us this list, give us this nice practical set of rules that we can follow so that we can put an end to our strife.”

Here it is. What child of God does not read the Word of God? God tells us what we need to know in the various situations of life and how to resolve these things. Maybe it is because we as a husband and wife are not reading the Word of God together, maybe that is the reason that there is conflict in marriage. I suppose I could give you a list of things that you can do. But, you understand, it is sin that causes the conflict. Sin! That means that it is a heart matter. We can have this whole list of rules or steps that we follow in order to resolve conflict in marriage. But that is only an outward, stop-gap type of a thing. God’s children, in whom God has worked by His grace, are called to deal with the sin-problem that lies within them. We are called to deal with the pride problem that exists in every one of us because of our own sinful flesh.

To deal with that sin problem takes a work of God’s grace. That is truly what it takes: a work of God’s grace within us. It is that work of God’s grace that we all well know because it is the work of sanctification. On the basis of that work of sanctification by which God has made us holy even as He is holy, God comes to you and to me and says, “Let not sin reign in your mortal bodies that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof.” Or, “Humble yourselves before God.” That is our calling right there, in marriage, too.

And that means that the first step in settling an argument and the surest way of resolving any kind of conflict in marriage is repentance. The way is clear. It is not so easy. Repent to God and then repent to one another. Resolving conflict is swallowing our pride and saying this: "I'm sorry." Three little words which are so hard to get out of our mouths: I am sorry! Our reaction when there is conflict is: "But look at what *he* did!" No, no, no! Look at what *you* did.

When I was a young minister in my first pastorate, I had a couple come to me with marriage problems. As a very conscientious young pastor, I had my notepad out. First of all I would listen to *him*. He would list out all of these things, you know, that his wife had done. So I am writing down this list. Then I listened to her and I wrote down the list of things that the husband had done against her. Then I had this nice long list. And I said, "OK, we're going to go through this list one at a time." We started with the first problem, right? Argue, argue, argue! I could not get past the first problem because they kept fighting over the first problem. How would I ever get to the second, third, ... twentieth problem that they gave to me? It kind of struck me. Why go through all these problems piece-meal. He is blaming her for everything and she is blaming him for everything. And then God (and I can thank the Lord for that, too!) said, No, that is not the problem — the problem is pride! Neither one of them could forgive the other. And neither one of them could say, "I'm sorry!" "I'm sorry for what I did to you," and not worry about what the other did to them, "I'm sorry for what I did to you." That comes first — repentance.

Then, of course, comes the willingness on our part to forgive as well, to let the matter drop and to cast those wrongs that the other has committed against us away from us as far as the east is from the west, because that is how far away God has cast our sins away from Him. Bury those sins in the blue sea. Let them sink to the depths. Never look at them again. Never hold them against the other. Forgive and forget. Oh, yes, they are still there. But do not say, "Apology accepted, but it still irks me!" That does not work!

After that takes place, then is the time to restore the covenant bond of friendship that has been fractured by conflict. We must re-establish friendship that has been lost. We must reconcile with one another. That is, we must consciously seek out fellowship with our spouse. Sometimes conflict can mar that relationship so badly that to try doing that at first even seems awkward. But it must be done if the conflict is to be resolved. That will be possible only when the two of us begin to communicate with each other once again. To sit down (leave the TV set alone, or

going out with others) and talk with each other. Talk with each other about the problems, the conflicts, and talk with each other about the spiritual concerns that we have as a husband and a wife and as a father and a mother.

Then, finally, in order to restore real peace and joy and harmony, we have to begin giving again, giving of ourselves and no longer being selfish. We do everything that it takes to make the other happy.

One last thing. We ought to realize that ultimately, resolving conflict in marriage is possible only by God's grace. Because, if left to ourselves, we will go our own merry way. And the problem will just escalate — no matter how much advice we get. Ultimately the only way to resolve our problems is by God's grace. That means that the chief means of swallowing pride and restoring our covenant relationship in marriage is by two things. Studying God's Word together as husband and wife, and praying.

God's Word tells it all. When God's Word is before us every day of our lives, then that is what is going to guide us in the way of peace and joy in marriage. And certainly we ought not to forget about prayer. When there is conflict in the marriage, let us face it, your prayers are hindered. As a husband and a wife, you might be able to put on a good front and be able to pray with the whole family, but will not be able to pray together. The surest way to restore harmony and peace in a marriage is to get down on our knees together before God's throne of grace (how thankful we can be that it is a throne of *grace*), and together confess our sins to God. The wrongs that we have done to one another, together confess those sins before God. When we do that, God is there. And God grants peace and joy and harmony in the marriage relationship. We want to resolve conflict completely? We need the Word of God in prayer.

Let nothing be done through strife and vainglory. Let our marriages exist for the glory of God's name. And may the relationship we share in that marriage, the attitude that we have toward one another in that marriage bond, always be to the glory of God. Then there is peace and there is harmony.

