

Courtship & Marriage article 16

Dear Young People,

I am nearing the end of our discussions on courtship and marriage. More specifically, I am nearing the end of what I wish to say concerning marriage. There are only two more things I want to discuss. And they may very well take me beyond this letter. We shall see.

The first matter is the problems that arise out of the fact that both husband and wife are sinful people. And, as our Marriage Form says, because of our sins we are subject to many sorrows and afflictions. The question is: How to handle these things when they arise.

Sins are bound to be present in any marriage, for a marriage is between two sinful people. These sins are sometimes a disinterest in spiritual things and a lack of devotion to godliness that is so essential to a covenant home. Other times either spouse may sin against his/her spouse, say cutting and hurtful things or do things that fill the other with grief. A husband may, for example, discover to his utter dismay that his wife likes to stay up late because she likes to watch immoral shows on the TV or visit internet pornographic sights. (You would perhaps be surprised at how many problems in marriages are due to the fact that husband or wife is addicted to watching material on TV or the internet that is immoral.)

It is also possible that either spouse shows a lack of interest in church and even suggests reasons why not to attend divine worship services. Or either a husband and/or a wife may be engaging in practices that are not helpful but harmful to family life.

And among all these things, either husband or wife can neglect his/her spouse by becoming too absorbed in other activities. The husband may devote more time and energy to his job than is helpful to a covenant home or to one's obligation to the church. You can probably add to this list, because it is not difficult to lengthen the list of our sins against God and against each other.

Many troubles and sorrows, also because we are sinners, come to married couples. The Lord may take from them a child early in life. Perhaps one of the children, when older, goes astray. One may want to date an unbeliever and insists on doing so in spite of many warnings. Sickness may come to either parent or to the children. Problems may arise that sometimes seem beyond solution. Financial hardship lurks around the corner. A father loses his job and cannot find another one. The Psalmist in Psalm 34:19 cries out with an anguished voice, "Many are the afflictions of the righteous."

What to do in times like this. That is the question.

As far as sin is concerned, the Scriptures make a most emphatic point of it that our "solution" to the dreadful problem of sin is confession. If confession is not forthcoming, sin becomes an increasingly major problem and begins to drive people further and further apart. But confession saves us from sin's dreadful consequences. Confession presupposes genuine sorrow for sin and a fervent wish that we hadn't done what we did. If there is no sorrow for sin, confession is a mockery. Sorrow for sin leads to forsaking the sin, whatever it may be.

But confession must always be made to the one against whom the sin is committed. Within the family, that means that confession is first of all to God; then it is to our husbands or wives whom we have hurt badly. Nor must parents be at all averse to confessing their sins committed against their children. Children learn to respect their parents more when they see

that their parents understand that they are not perfect, but also do things that are wrong; and they learn to confess their sins themselves to those against whom they sin. Children must confess their sins to their siblings when they sin against them, but must also confess their sins to their parents, their teachers or their friends when they sin against them.

With God there is always forgiveness; and so we must learn to forgive each other. This is sometimes not so easy. If a husband is unfaithful, it is very difficult for a wife to forgive him even if he is truly sorry. Sometimes people will say to me, "I will forgive, but I can never forget." But that is nonsense, for it is true that grievous sins we will never forget, even though they fade in our memories. But to forgive and not forget is really to say, "I will forgive, I guess, but I will always hold what you did against you." That is wrong. What if God would do that to us?

We are very proud people and we do not like to admit that we are wrong and have done wrong. The Chinese speak of "saving face," and confession of wrong is frequently a matter of "losing face." But in the church it is not so.

It is always wise after sin has been confessed and forgiven to pray together: parents, parents and children, husband and wife. And it is better to pray aloud, the husband leading. At the foot of God's throne of mercy we stand together in need of the rich grace of forgiveness. And God will give it.

In the world, afflictions and troubles drive people apart. How often do we not read in the papers that some husband and wife have undergone a terrible experience. And, lo and behold, a few weeks or months later, one reads that the two are getting a divorce. Their marriage cannot bear the strain of sorrow or trouble. The reason is easy to find: each one affected thinks only of himself or herself – and selfishness always drives apart.

But between believers, sorrows and troubles, afflictions and sufferings, drive husband and wife, parents and children closer together. And that is because they bear the burden of their pain together, the husband thinking of the agony of his wife, and the wife thinking of the sorrow of her husband; and both asking how they can help the other. Parents take their children in their arms to whisper to them what the Bible says about God's love for His people. And children, in their own childish way, remind their parents of what the Bible says, for "out of the mouths of babes, God has ordained praise." It is no wonder that Jesus tells us that we must become like little children for their faith sometimes outshines ours.

And they do this, again at the foot of the cross, as they labor to submit their wills to their heavenly Father. They comfort each other with the words of Scripture. They talk together of how great the burden is, but how great is the grace of God that makes it possible to bear their burdens. They sing together the precious songs of the church as found in the OT Psalter. And though the words choke in their throats, the words of God's book of comfort bring peace and quietness to their spirits – and increase their love for God and for each other.

Next time, the Lord willing, I am going to discuss though briefly the matter of divorce and remarriage.

With love in our Lord,

Prof Hanko