

Here is the 4th and final set of scribblings on love....

Love is Exclusive

“My lover is mine, and I am his” (Song of Solomon 2.16, TEV).

*“Let the king have 60 queens, 80 concubines, young women without number!
But I love only one, and she is as lovely as a dove” (Song of Solomon 6.8-9, TEV).*

Small print is important – every covenant relationship has small print, whether it be a mortgage contract, an employment agreement, a cell phone contract....and even a marriage covenant.

Beneath the pomp and circumstance, the elegant dresses, the beautiful flowers, the gracious bridesmaids, the solemn pageboys, the nervous groom, the uplifting music, and the delicious reception, there is a deeper reality, there is the small print of a marriage. In a marriage covenant, the small print is represented by the marriage vows. The marriage vows are the heart of the marriage, for they are made before God and human witnesses, and they outline the responsibilities of each spouse one to the other.

The earliest English wedding vows.

In 1085, the Bishop of Salisbury authorized a form of marriage vows in which the bride promised to be ‘bonny and buxom in bed and at board.’ ‘Bonny’ was from the French word ‘bon’, meaning ‘good’. ‘Buxom’ was from an Old German word meaning ‘obedient’. ‘Board’ was where you put the food (the sideboard), and ‘bed’ meant the nighttime. So, to be ‘bonny and buxom in bed and at board’ simply meant ‘to behave properly and obediently through night and day’. Over time these vows were dropped, for the meaning of the words changed in the middle ages, and people objected to wives promising to be ‘bonny and buxom in bed’. Today however, many couples promise to ‘love, honor and cherish’ one another....so what do these vows mean? To answer this, we need to go back to the Scriptures.

The earliest Jewish vows.

In the 1890s, two English twin sisters (Agnes Smith Lewis and Margaret Dunlop Gibson) were both widowed, and set off on a Middle Eastern tour. Because of their ability to read Hebrew, Greek, Arabic and Syriac, they were welcomed at monasteries and centers of research, including male-only facilities.

In their research, they came to the Cairo synagogue, where they were given permission to open the *geniza*. A *geniza* was a storage facility where the Jews stored indefinitely any document with the name of God written on it, which were considered too holy to be thrown away.

Every few year, the *geniza* would be opened, the documents buried in a full Jewish burial ceremony. However, in the Cairo *geniza* this had not happened, so the sisters found Jewish documents that went back over 1,000 years, including many Jewish marriage covenants.

The sisters brought huge quantities back to Cambridge University for research, and even today these documents have only just finished being archived, with many never having been studied.

It was discovered that vows to ‘love, honor and cherish’ are based on the Jewish marriage vows that were themselves based on Ex. 21.10-11, which details the responsibility of a Jewish husband to his 1st wife

should he choose to take a 2nd wife. 'If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish the food, clothing, or marital rights of the first wife.'

A Jewish husband would promise 4 things: to provide food; to provide material for clothing; to provide conjugal love; to be faithful to his wife. A Jewish wife would promise 4 things: to prepare the food; to make the clothing; to provide conjugal love; and to be faithful to her husband.

Christian vows.

The Apostle Paul built on these Jewish vows from Ex. 21 in Eph. 5.28-29. 'In the same way, husbands should **love** their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he **nourishes** and **tenderly cares** (cherishes) for it, just as Christ does for the church.'

Paul says that husband should love, nourish and cherish their brides as Christ loves, nourishes and cherishes the Church. These instructions from the Apostle Paul are the basis for Christian wedding vows today. Though the individual words may change, the essence of the vows is this:

Firstly, to love. Both parties covenant before God to love one another in a sacrificial manner, seeking first and foremost the good not of themselves, but of the other party. This love for one another is modeled on the love God has for our world, a love so great that He gave His only-begotten Son to die for rebellious sinners. Expressed within a marriage, this involves a conscious seeking after only that which is good for one's spouse, a guiding principle that a husband will only seek to do or be that which will benefit his wife, and a wife will only seek to do or be that which will benefit her husband.

Secondly, to honor. Both parties covenant before God to provide conjugal love, and to be faithful one to the other. They are establishing sacred boundaries around their relationship, creating a personal 'Garden of Eden' into which none other than themselves may enter either in thought or in deed. The Apostle Paul writes that 'let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled' (Heb. 13.4). The physical expression of love in marriage is to be pure and honorable, without debasing or humiliating one's spouse.

Thirdly, to cherish. If to "honor" means to provide emotional and spiritual nurture, this vow means to nurture one another physically, as one carefully nurtures a plant or a child. Bride and groom vow to only engage in those activities which will physically lift up, nurture, develop and grow one another.

Within the marriage vows, there is no place for verbal, physical, emotional or other forms of abuse, for these represent the breaking of the vows to love, honor or cherish. To hit one's spouse, to swear at one's spouse, to harm one's spouse in any way, physically or emotionally – all these acts are a breaking of the marriage vows, and the guilty party is to repent and seek forgiveness.

Tragically, many marriages end in divorce, and a divorce is simply a delayed legal recognition that at some time prior to the divorce, one or both parties to the marriage broke their vows, and that the genuine repentance and heart-felt forgiveness Jesus calls His followers to was beyond their reach.

"Close your heart to every love but mine; hold no one in your arms but me" (Song of Solomon 8.6a, TEV).

What is the personal application for me?

Best wishes,

Conrad.