

**WHY I AM COMMITTED TO
THE MINISTRY OF MARRIAGE**
by Selwyn Hughes



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Marriage is a big theme in God's economy and certainly, it is one of the most important ministries of my life. If the Lord Jesus Christ were to say to me: "I want you to speak one message for the rest of your life and I will anoint you particularly for that. I will give tremendous impact to your words and you can choose whatever message you wish", I would choose the subject of marriage. It is a theme which is constantly on my mind and has dominated my life.

I have not chosen a title for this message and I should say that I am always very cautious about choosing titles for messages. This is because, many years ago, when I was in Atlanta, Georgia, speaking in a Southern Baptist Church, a friend of mine said that they were having great difficulty in getting men to come to the evening services and wondered whether I could think of a really exciting title to draw them in. I prayed about this, wondering what preaching topic might attract a fairly big congregation, because, in America, all the men like to watch football on a Sunday night. I decided to preach on the text: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" and, searching for an interesting and arresting title – something that could be put in the newspapers – I came up with this: "Ten words to transform your life". My pastor friend thought that was great and we put it in the newspaper. Then, when Sunday came round, we mounted the platform and there, in the congregation, were hundreds of men. It had worked! It was fantastic! I preached and several people came to Christ. However, at the end, I noticed several men standing at the back, talking, with newspapers in their hands. They kept looking at me and finally one found the courage to come and say, 'Mr Hughes, we enjoyed your message very much, but you didn't keep to your title.' I said that I thought I had but they insisted I had not mentioned anything relevant to my title. I repeated that I really thought I had kept to my title and my message but they would not agree. Then they showed me the advert and there I discovered a misprint: instead of *Ten words to transform your life*, the newspaper had printed *Ten words to transform your wife*. Ever since, I have taken care in choosing a title!

If I were to choose a title for this talk, it would be *Why I am committed to the ministry to marriage*. One of the alarming trends in today's society is the disappearance of the distinctively Christian home. I refer not so much to the homes where Christians reside but to the homes where Christ rules and where biblical principles prevail. Such homes are fast disappearing and I want to raise my voice in defence of the Christian Gospel.

There are three reasons why I am involved in the ministry to marriage. The first is that God has done so much for me in saving my own marriage from failure. The second reason is that I am convinced, from Scripture, of its prime position in society, and of its power, and of its purpose. The third is that it is within the context of marriage that the reality of God's love is most powerfully transformed into feelings.

Firstly, because God has done so much for me in saving my own marriage, I want to share with others what He has shared with me. I married in the early nineteen-fifties and, if you had asked me in the first five years of marriage what my marriage was like, I would have said that it was wonderful. 'I'm the boss,' I might have said. 'My wife does everything I say and we have a biblical marriage.' However, my marriage was beginning to get into trouble in the first ten years, because I thought that my main mission in life was to look after Christ's church and to let God look after my wife. Everywhere I went I said that, and I was travelling all over the world at that time.

I was the pastor of a church but I was also travelling to different countries. Then I would come back, minister in the church and off I would go again.

One day my wife said to me, 'If I survive you,' (which, in fact, she didn't because she died in 1987 from cancer) do you know what I'm going to choose as your epitaph? Gone to another meeting.' I had thought that the busier I was in the church of Jesus Christ, the more spiritual I was. What I did not realise was that, underneath the drive to be constantly busy doing all these things, was a covert bid for attention, an itch to prove myself. This was what was driving me in the early years of my marriage and my ministry. Of course, I would not have let myself admit that and, in my prayers, I would often say: 'Lord, I am so grateful for the opportunity to share Your love with all these people, and I am thrilled to be able to tell them all about You and Your wonderful love.'

Deep down in my heart something else was going on: the desire to prove my ability in the church and to attract attention in the circles I was moving in. I came to realise that it is so easy to offer prayers with our lips which are entirely different from what is going on in our hearts. One day, while flying into Heathrow on my return from Scandinavia, God spoke to me and He said, 'You're not treating your wife right.' When I got home, over the weekend, I cancelled a lot of my engagements - obviously not those in the near future where cancelling would cause difficulties for churches and for people, but those about a year ahead. Then I began to focus and concentrate on my prime ministry, which was my wife. I had got it wrong: I thought my prime ministry was to the church but it was not. My prime ministry was to my wife. I was a priest in my home before I was a priest in the church and, when I began to focus on that, something changed and my marriage was transformed. I can remember the weekend, early in the sixties, when I went down upon my knees and I said to my wife, 'From now on, you are going to be first in my life after God - God first, you second and the church next.' That brought about a transformation in our marriage that was absolutely wonderful. I began to focus on my wife in such a way that my whole ministry was transformed and out of that came many of the things that I have accomplished in my life under God.

The biggest joy in my heart, and the greatest thrill, is not that I am read by nearly a million people around the world every day. It is that, under God, I was able to build a good and godly marriage. Nothing else compares with that. It was not perfect and there were tensions at times but, as I look back, there is a glow in my soul that, above all the accomplishments that God has enabled me to achieve, I was able, with His help, to build such a marriage.

In those first ten years of my marriage there were many failures, and God rescued me from them. Before I recount one of the biggest failures, I shall preface it with a story. Many years ago, while I was in Malaysia, an old Chinese Christian came up to me and said, 'Selwyn, I want to ask you a question. Where was Adam when Eve was being tempted?' Even though I had studied theology, and knew my Bible fairly well, I had always had it in the back of my mind that Adam was absent, busy somewhere else in the garden, planting potatoes, perhaps, when the devil saw his chance and sneaked in and tempted Eve. That was what I thought and that was what I told my Chinese Christian friend. He said, 'Go to Genesis Chapter 3, verse 6'. This, in the New International Version, reads: 'So when the

woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, *who was with her* (emphasis mine), and he ate it.' I admit that I had read that verse hundreds of times but, suddenly, I began to see what he was saying and I exclaimed to my Chinese friend, 'So he was *there*, the rascal, and he never said a word!'

In the biblical account of Adam's creation God spoke 10 times, punctuating that wonderful first chapter of Genesis with these words: And God said ... And God said ... And God said. And the very first thing the newly created Adam did was to speak, by naming the animals. God didn't name the animals. Many people think that God whispered to Adam, 'This is a lion. This is a hippopotamus.' But that's not what the Bible says. God brought them to Adam to see what he would call them. And there you see Adam with his sinless mind. He launched out creatively naming the animal as he observed the characteristics of each one. He spoke into that confusion with a creative voice. But then, when it came to speaking up when his wife was being tempted, he said nothing.

Let me tell you men something: you will never understand the essential nature of a man until you understand the silence of Adam. What do men do when they don't know what to do? Nothing! Isn't that what we do? You will never really understand the essence of how sin has affected us until you understand what happened in that moment when Adam was standing there and had the opportunity to speak creatively into that situation but said nothing. If God had said to Adam, 'Look, Adam, in a little while a snake is going to creep up on your wife and he's going to say this to her. Now I want you to plan carefully for this.' If God had done that, doubtless Adam would have said something. But, as it happened, he found himself in the midst of confusion and, lacking specific guidance and not knowing what to say, he said nothing. That is one of the greatest failures I have found with men in my counselling experience. When they don't know what to do, or say, they don't do or say anything!

There was an occasion early in my ministry (before God spoke to me), when the phone rang while I was preparing a talk for my church in London on *How to build a good and godly marriage*". My wife answered the phone and came to my study door saying, 'Darling, it's for you. Can you come?' It turned out to be somebody inviting me to speak at a conference in three months' time. The elders of my church had given me the freedom to go away for twelve weekends a year without consulting them, provided I found a suitable substitute for the pulpit. I agreed to do it and put down the date in my diary. My wife was standing there, and I could see that she was perturbed and I wondered why. When I put the phone down, she asked me if I had booked that weekend and, when I said I had, she said, 'Don't you know what's happening that weekend? We're expecting our baby and you know I would like you to be with me.'" Then her lip began to tremble and tears started to roll down her cheeks. Seeing her become emotional I didn't know what to do, so I went back to my study and finished my message on *How to build a good and godly marriage*. I was better at teaching it than actually doing it! I didn't know what to do, so I did nothing. I find that men either do nothing, or they withdraw, or they go back to doing what they do well. The greatest difficulty, I have found, that men experience in marriage is their inability to speak creatively into a situation when they have no specific guidance.

What should Adam have done? He should have caught Eve by the hand and said, 'Come on, let's get out of here. This snake is violating the purposes of God.' I don't know if they had rakes in the Garden of Eden, but if they had he could have got one, or something like it, and driven the serpent away! I don't know what precisely, but he could have done something and he did nothing. At the critical moment, he failed the test.

Now I want to say in my own defence that I learnt a lot from the incident I recounted earlier and, in fact, I was actually preaching at that conference the weekend when my second son, John, was born. I didn't know what to do, so I just went back to doing the things that I knew

how to do well. I could teach, I could preach, I could put a sermon or a talk together. I could do those things well, but what I couldn't do was to love well. When a man is unable to love well, he falls back on something that he knows how to do well, and in time he will come to depend and draw upon that. Loving well means moving creatively into the midst of confusion, trusting God to give the words. What should I have done? I should have gone to my wife and put my arms around her and said, 'Darling, I have made a mistake. I'll call them back right now and I'll cancel the engagement.' That's what I should have done, but I failed to do it. I remember that it was some months after this that God began to speak to me about my marriage and I realised that I was not treating my wife right. I was not being a priest in my home because I was not being the loving husband to her that He wanted me to be.

I remember one night, while we were having these difficulties in our marriage, there was a lot of tension when we got into bed together and, just before I went to sleep, I felt my wife's body quietly shaking and then heard her muffled sobs. 'What's wrong?' I asked. 'Are we going to make it in our marriage?' was her reply. Then I knew that my next words would be some of the most important words I would ever in my life speak and the most potent that I had ever spoken. But I didn't know what to say and I realise now that I was waiting for God to give me some words, to project them on the ceiling or on the wall and say, 'Repeat these words to your wife!' But He didn't and I knew that I had to reach out without specific guidance, without having the words in my mind. I knew that I had to move towards my wife and as I did, words came and I said, 'Yes! We *are* going to make it in our marriage. I'm committed to you and I am going to stay with that commitment, no matter what!' My wife told me that those were the finest and most powerful words I had ever spoken to her in the whole of our married life.

It's so easy to fail in marriage and one of the reasons I'm so committed to it is because God enabled me to build up my marriage at the point of failure when my wife was questioning whether we were really going to make it. We could have gone in different directions or taken separate ways but, at that moment, as I stepped out in faith, as I moved towards her, not knowing what to say but wanting to do something and believing that the words would come, God, in the most wonderful way, brought about a relationship between us that became absolutely fantastic.

I remember speaking in Moscow, some years ago, on the silence of Adam to hundreds of men who were leaders from all over Russia. I was speaking about the failures of men in married life and focusing on this as the prime one and I was being interpreted by one of the Billy Graham organisation's interpreters, a young man with a fine grasp of English. As I continued speaking, I could see many of the men beginning to look very uncomfortable, including the interpreter, and I started to wonder what in the world was happening. When the meeting finished we went into the coffee shop of the hotel where the meeting was being held and someone said to me, 'You have actually caused a riot in that place.' 'Why? What have I said?' I asked. 'You have broken the taboo in Russia on criticising a man publicly, from the platform. It is an unwritten law in Russia that you don't do that kind of thing.' I had done this in all innocence and, when I finished speaking, they had all got together and said: 'What are we going to do about this? Here's this man who's come from United Kingdom and he's spoken to us like this. What are we going to do?' Of course, when I heard of all that was going on in the hall, I began to think that I should check with the airlines whether I could make it out of there the next day! But, at the time there was significant unrest in Moscow and the tanks were lining up in Red Square. The expatriates were getting out of Russia and I was told that all the planes were likely to be filled. So I spent a very restless night and when I returned to the meeting in the morning I found a most amazing thing.

One of the men said to me, 'Last night we were very troubled because you had broken a taboo in Russia. However, we got together and we talked about it and one man stood up

and said, "He's right and we all have to recognise that in many ways we have failed our wives by failing to move creatively towards them", but we didn't know what to do and so we withdrew. So we decided that we would confess this and we spent hours in prayer through the night.' And they got up one by one, these Russian men, some of them built like refrigerators who could have knocked me all the way to London Airport, and they stood there with tears flowing down their cheeks and said, 'God has spoken to us.' One man, who was in charge of a thousand Baptist Evangelists, rang his wife and said, 'As soon as I come home I've got something to tell you,' and he told all the evangelists under his care, 'I want you to make sure you don't fail your wives in this and that you give them the prime place in your ministry.'

That's why I'm so excited about marriage. God saved my marriage from failure. Praise the Lord!

Let me tell you the **second** reason why I am so committed to marriage. It's because I am convinced from Scripture of its prime position in society, its purpose and its permanence. The Bible has a lot to say about marriage and it begins and ends with a marriage. It begins with the marriage of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and ends with the marriage of the Church and Jesus Christ in the last chapters of Revelation. The very first miracle that Christ wrought was at a marriage, when He intervened and saved that wedding from embarrassment by turning the water into wine.

Being a Welshman, I have a very vivid imagination and I can imagine the first night of the bride and the bridegroom at Cana of Galilee: as they settle down in bed the bride snuggles up to her new husband, and they review the day together, the guests who were there, and the amazing miracle of the water being turned into wine. I can just hear the bride saying to him, "Aren't you glad we invited Jesus to the wedding?" Are we glad we invited Jesus to our wedding?

I often review the circumstances of the world's first wedding and I have found that the best way to understand marriage is to look at the original design and see how God put it together and intends it to work. When we at CWR train counsellors in marriage counselling, we take them back to the original marriage in the Garden of Eden and say that it is only as you look at how God put it together that you will be able to spot deviations from His design. If you don't have a clear model of marriage in your mind, you will never spot the deviations. One of the most important things we can do in these days is to think about it in this way, to see how sin has damaged the system and how Christ has come has put it all back together again.

There is no doubt about the fact that we are living in a day when many marriages are in trouble. Everyone is aware of it and many Christians want to help people with their marital problems. I recently read a book that states that marriage is doomed: it has no future and wedding rings are a thing of the past. I don't believe that. I believe that, because marriage was built into creation, it has a permanent, not a temporary, validity. It is built into the very creation and that is why I like to take people into the early chapters of Genesis. I encourage them to go back and look at creation and at the world's first marriage because, if you do not have a clear theology of marriage, you will never have a good psychology of marriage. All the books about marriage are talking about the psychology of marriage, about communication and things like ten ways to communicate. Those things are important and not to be mocked in any way. I talk about them myself but I also believe we need to talk about something even more important and that is the theology of marriage – what it's all about from God's perspective. Your theology determines your psychology and, if you don't have a good understanding of what marriage is from God's perspective, then you will not be able to help prevent people from deviating from His design.

A friend of mine is a painter and one day, while I was in his studio I noticed that he had some coloured stones and I asked him what they were for. He said that, when he is painting and his eyes get tired and he can't visualise the colours, he washes his eyes in these precious stones. I think Christians need to do something like that. We need to wash our eyes in the glorious colours of Scripture and hear what God has to say about marriage. I believe the Bible and I trust the Bible. I accept its authority and I bring my life and everything I have under its authority. In Genesis 1 it says: 'In the beginning God...' The first person we meet in Scripture is God and, if we start with mankind or marriage, we are soon going to get it wrong. If we don't start with God, we are not going to have a clear understanding of what marriage is all about. Whenever I see a book offering a course in marriage counselling, I look at its first page and, if it starts with a couple, I think it's not going to get anyone very far. Unless you have a sound theology of marriage, everything said is going to be slightly distorted and out of perspective.

The Bible begins not with marriage but with God. The word in the Hebrew is *Elohim* and that word is in the plural so, when we step into the Bible, we come up against the God who is His own community. The very first thing we learn about God is that He is a relational being, a Trinity. There is more than one Divine Person in the courts of Heaven. Right there, at the beginning of Scripture, we see a God who is in relationship, a God who is His own community. Whoever said: 'Two's company, three's a crowd' did not understand the Trinity, because the wonderful thing about the Trinity is that the three Persons live in perfect relationship. Sometimes we can't get on with each other without falling out for more than a week at a time but the Trinity has been in existence for all eternity with never a row nor a quarrel.

If I heard that they were having a row in the Trinity I would be devastated, because I draw my security from the fact there are secure and solid relationships within the Trinity. It is strange how a doctrine one has always believed can take on a new perspective and revolutionise one's whole life and ministry. That happened to me some years ago as a result of reading *The Everlasting God* by an Australian theologian, David Broughton Knox. Browsing through the section on the Trinity, I came across a statement which blew my mind and caused a great paradigm shift in my ministry. I experienced something which put me off my food for three days and shifted my thinking into a completely different gear. It changed my whole outlook upon writing, upon the Scriptures and upon counselling. This is what he says: 'The Father loves the Son and gives Him everything. The Son always does that which pleases the Father. The Spirit takes the things of the Son and shows them to us. We learn from the Trinity that relationship is the essence of reality and therefore is the essence of our existence.'

What blew my mind is the assertion that *relationship* is the essence of reality. I had always believed that truth is the essence of reality. That was what I had been taught in college and, as a young student, I remember saying to my tutors that everything is valuable only as it is true. I wanted to know truth and that pursuit of truth filled my whole life. Then along comes an Australian theologian saying that it is not truth that is the essence of reality but relationship! As I thought about that, I began to realise that, if one believes that God exists as three persons who are distinct enough actually to relate to one another, then it somehow becomes clear that the final nature of things is somehow wrapped up in the idea of relationship. The essence of what it means to exist, the core of ontology (the understanding of the nature of being) can no longer be thought of in terms of individuality. I remembered a statement of one of our great Welsh theologians, Dr C Jones, which I read just after I had been converted as a young man: 'Relationship is the thread out of which God has spun the universe'.

The first pair of human beings were created out of a perfect relationship. A simplified, perhaps over-simplified, statement concerning the Scripture is that the Bible is a book about relationships. I sometimes wonder why God did not simply give us a book of systematic theology so that we could just turn to the back and look up what we need to know, but it's a

book about relationships that He has given us: perfect relationships in the Trinity, broken relationships in Eden, restored relationships in Christ. We need to understand the theme of relationship which is the essence of our existence. Ultimate reality is not propositional, it's personal. When we get to Heaven, we'll not be talking about doctrine, we'll be relating in the way that the Trinity relates – perfectly.

Some have the strange idea that relationships cause problems. They don't. Relationships *reveal* problems. The things going on inside you will surface when you get into a close relationship, causing you, perhaps, to say to yourself, 'Now what's going on here?' Many times, as I have taken people through a pre-marital counselling course, I have found that, as they have begun to realise they are getting closely involved, they have felt threatened and intimidated. The closer we get in relationships, the more the flaws in our ability to relate begin to surface and we start to see what is going on.

I believe that relationship is indeed the essence of reality and that is why, when we get back to the original pattern in marriage, we see God, as Trinity in perfect relationship, producing a couple to live on the earth in perfect relationship. Adam was created first and he related perfectly to God. Then God brought someone to live alongside him who was like himself, a being 'with skin on' to whom he could relate. It was only then, after Eve was created and Adam and Eve were joined together, that we could have a picture of a relational God. God relates perfectly in the Trinity and He produced Adam and Eve so that they could relate and reflect the relationship that is ongoing within the Trinity.

That's what God talks about in His Word: it's all about *relationship* and, unless we know how to handle that, we will be in great difficulty.

One of the best definitions of marriage that I have ever come across is that given by Martin Luther and I guarantee that it won't make sense when you *first* hear it: It is this: 'Marriage is God's best way of explaining Himself.' Think of the difficulty God has in explaining Himself to us. Every one of us knows that God is love and we are all very familiar with the text from the Epistle of John: God is love. That is an incontrovertible fact and everybody knows it to be true, but what does it mean that God loves us? God cannot not come down and give us a warm physical embrace because He is invisible and intangible – a non-material Being. So how can God relay His love to us? There are times when we feel His presence and sense that He loves but there are also times, if we are really honest, when we don't feel that. Many people have expressed to me their desire to *feel* God's love pouring into them. They say: 'I know He loves me. I understand this intellectually but I long to feel the reality of it in my life. I would love sometimes to feel the warmth of a hug from God.' That is not possible: God cannot put a kiss upon your lips, He cannot buy you flowers. He could, of course, cause flowers to appear, but that is not the way He works. As C S Lewis has said, God is not a magician, He is a miracle worker. When God reaches down from heaven, wanting to relay His love to us, there are problems and limitations because God is a non-physical being and we are physical. However, He has found a wonderful way whereby He can convey the fact of His love for us in such a way that it is transformed into feelings. This takes place in all good relationships, but most powerfully in marriage because of the additional component of the physical relationship, which belongs, as the Bible teaches, only to marriage.

Many years ago my wife and I spent a whole weekend in a kind of quiet retreat in our own home, thinking this through and discussing it, and we began to understand and talk to one another along these lines: We know as an incontrovertible fact that God loves us, that He *is* love, but how do we transform that knowledge into feelings in our relationship? As we began to talk to each other about this I realised that we could relate to each other in such a way that we could bring about a conscious experience of how much each of us was loved by God. I saw that, in response to my moving and speaking tenderly towards her, my wife would sense, through my feelings that were being relayed to her, something of how much

God loved her. As I held her and kissed her and spoke tenderly to her and gave her flowers I could become a *window* through which the love of God could be clearly seen. (Men, let me tell you that the flowers your wife appreciates most are not those given on a birthday or anniversary but the unexpected flowers. I have learned this after thousands of hours in a counselling room!)

The beautiful discovery we made about marriage is that, although God is invisible and intangible, we can so relate to one another in marriage that we can give each other a real taste of what it means to be loved by God. One of the most wonderful things that a man can do for his wife is to take her face in his hands and say: 'I thank God that, out of all the billions of men in this world, He has chosen me to give you a clearer picture of how much you are loved by God.' We ought, of course, to be doing this in all our relationships, especially in the church but because, in marriage, there is physical union, the feelings that arise are more intense than can be found in any other relationship. People try to find them elsewhere these days, but God wants them contained within the marital relationship.

When my wife and I began to realise that, in the way we related to each other, we could actually give each other a clearer picture of how much we were loved by God, our marriage took on a new dimension.

My wife died some years ago from cancer. Three days before she died she said to me: 'I want to thank you for giving me a clearer picture of how much I am loved by God'. My reply to her was, 'Thank you for being for me a window through which I could see how much God really loves me and respects me'. (You see, respect is what a man most longs for, while what a woman longs for is love.) We held hands and within an hour she had slipped into a coma.

And so I say that the greatest enjoyment I can have in life is the glow in my soul when I talk about marriage? It is because, just before my marriage ended, my wife thanked me for being the window through which could see clearly how much she was loved by God. That made all the struggles and the strain of marriage, any marriage, worthwhile. It was the most wonderful moment of my life, next to my conversion.

It is a fact that, in marriage, God's love is most powerfully transformed into our feelings. It is also a fact that everyone's marriage will end one day because one of you will die. What I long for is that, before they die, married people may look at each other, as we did, and thank each other for being a window through which they have seen more clearly, and felt more fully, how much they are loved by God.

I hope I have been able to prompt you to ask yourselves: 'How can we build a good and godly marriage, consistent with Scripture and reflecting the glory of God to all those who live in a darkened world and who need to see a Christian model of marriage? How can we reflect the relationships within the Trinity in heaven and embody them in our churches, in our lives and in our marriages.'

I pray for His enabling.

The late Rev Dr Selwyn Hughes was a well-known writer, teacher and preacher. He wrote the daily Bible Study Notes 'Every Day with Jesus', and founded CWR, an international ministry based in Farnham, Surrey. He passed on in January 2006. Details of his books and video resources maybe found on the CWR website www.cwr.org.uk

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