

# Reformed Congregational Fellowship Pastor's Conference—Apr 2018

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## —The Mutual Duty of Helpfulness— *Savoy Declaration Ch. 25: Of Marriage*

The authors who penned the Savoy Declaration were Puritans of the highest rank. Among them, of course, were giants like Thomas Goodwin and John Owen—men well known for their theology no less than for their piety. It's their theology that finds such beautiful and careful expression in the Savoy; and in the Chapter before us this year we consider their perspective on marriage. If J. I. Packer is correct in *A Quest for Godliness*, when he says the Puritans were, under God, the very creators of the English Christian marriage because their teaching on it gave it such strength, substance, and solidity,<sup>1</sup> then it may just be that we could not have chosen better teachers than those, the likes of whom, penned this Declaration so long ago.

The prevailing idea of our advanced age is that the Puritans are outdated fuddy-duddies. Like every man, they were certainly men of their age and cannot be faulted for having addressed their own age in their writings. And yet, when their writings and sermons are honestly examined for the biblical principles which fueled their convictions, it cannot be true to say that they were merely men of their age and nothing more. Like the Church's faithful fathers in every age, when they spoke the truth they spoke beyond their own age to every age; and all who have ever had ears to hear their voice has and will again bless God for it.

In a day like ours, when the creation ordinance of marriage is quickly losing its footing as well as its models and exemplars, great good can come from listening to the Puritans on both the nature of marriage and the duties which husband and wife owe to each other. In *my recent book on marriage*, which I co-authored with Joel Beeke, we demonstrate that the Puritan theology and perspective on marriage contain desperately-needed wisdom for our contemporary culture. For as Michael Haykin pointed out, "the Puritans were strong in the weakest areas of modern marital thought...and their writings are a largely overlooked resource for Christian living today."<sup>2</sup> The writings of the Puritans on marriage are much more practical and detailed than most contemporary treatments, and this is due to two things. First, their conviction that the principles of God's Word spoke with precision to the very details of life, and second, their conviction that the very details of life were to be lived *Coram Deo* and *ad Gloriam Dei*.

In the second paragraph of the Savoy's treatment of marriage we read these words: "Marriage was ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife; for the increase of mankind with a legitimate issue, and of the Church with an holy seed, and for preventing of uncleanness." This statement addresses the purposes for which God ordained marriage and says there are four—it's the first one that occupies our attention this morning: *the mutual help of husband and wife*. The Puritans typically treated this purpose under the title of *companionship*. We'll need to consider the purpose itself and then we'll consider the mutual duty of husband and wife to see that their marriage fulfills that purpose.<sup>3</sup>

### **Helpfulness as a purpose of marriage**

It's clear from the Lord's words in Gen 2.18 that Eve was created to be Adam's companion. God said it was not good for Adam to be alone and He proceeded to make Eve as a suitable helpmate for him. Marriage was therefore ordained in response to a natural necessity.<sup>4</sup> Henry Smith said, Eve was given as a wife "to avoid the inconvenience of solitariness signified in these words, 'It is not good for man to be alone.' [It

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<sup>1</sup> Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 260-61.

<sup>2</sup> Haykin, from the Foreword to *Living in a Godly Marriage*.

<sup>3</sup> This paper is excerpted and edited from Chapters 2 and 6 of *Living in a Godly Marriage* by La Belle and Beeke (2016).

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, 6.

is] as though [God] had said, This life would be miserable and irksome, and unpleasant to man, if the Lord had not given him a wife to company his troubles.”<sup>5</sup> Smith went on to say, “If it be not good for man to be alone, then it is good for man to have a fellow; therefore as God created a pair of all other kinds, so he created a pair of this kind.”<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Henry Ainsworth said God made man’s companion “one that should be as his second self, like him in nature, knit unto him in love, needful for procreation of seed, helpful in all duties, present always with him, and so very meet and [convenient] for him.”<sup>7</sup>

Of course, this doesn’t mean there’s no place for a single life, that singleness lacks real advantages, or that a life of celibacy is not pleasing to the Lord. At a time when the early church anticipated being scattered and broken into pieces by persecution, many of God’s people found it more prudent to live a single life, lest being married cause undue suffering and hardship on a family when one parent was taken away by necessity or force. Singleness was not in itself a better service to God, but it might be more useful during the times of affliction in which the early church was living. “Saint Paul indeed commends single life [in 1 Cor. 7:25–31],” said Richard Bernard, “not simply, but with respect unto the then present times, full of troubles and persecutions.”<sup>8</sup>

When God calls a person to be single, that condition has many advantages which are described by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:35 as attending upon the Lord “without distraction” (KJV) or as an “undivided devotion to the Lord” (ESV). Yet marriage is still to “be held in honor among all” (Heb. 13:4).

Some say that the single life is full of perpetual sweetness because it lacks the bitter trials of the married life. This may be true to some extent; but it is still a life of singularity and—what is sometimes more dominant—a life of hardship because by definition it is a life *without* the companionship that only a spouse can provide. Ecclesiastes 4:10 tersely summarizes the hardship of being alone when it says, “Woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!” Applying this verse to marriage, Charles Bridges summarized the Puritan view of the advantages of marriage, saying:

“It is not good for man to be alone”.... If it was “not good” in paradise, much less is it in a wilderness world. What claim, then, has a monastic or a celibate life to higher perfection? When *two* are brought together by the Lord’s providence (Gen. 2:22)—and specially when each is fitted to each other by His grace, “dwelling together as heirs of the grace of life” (1 Pet. 3:7), in abiding union of hearts, having one faith—one hope—one aim—who can doubt the fact that *Two are better than one?* Love sweetens toil, soothes the sting of trouble, and gives a Christian zest of enjoyment to every course of daily life. The mutual exercises of sympathy give energy to prayer, and furnish large materials for confidence and praise.<sup>9</sup>

While marriage has its thorns, so does every relationship this side of heaven. No condition on earth is entirely happy, if happy means “free of trouble.” But marriage has the particular advantage of *support* in times of sorrow because of the companionship it offers. God brought two together “that the infinite troubles which lie upon us in the world might be eased with the comfort and help one of another.”<sup>10</sup> “Though man’s corruption has filled [marriage] and every state of life with snares and troubles, yet from the beginning it

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<sup>5</sup> Smith, 1:12.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, 1:12.

<sup>7</sup> Ainsworth, 1:15.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Bernard, *Ruth’s Repentance: Or, A Commentary Upon the Book of Ruth* (Stoke-on-Trent, England: Tentmaker Publications, 2006), 66.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Bridges, *Ecclesiastes* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1992), 90.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, 1:12.

was not so,” said Baxter. But “God appointed it for mutual help, and as such it may be used.... A married life has its benefits, which you are thankfully to accept and acknowledge to God.”<sup>11</sup>

A single person lacks a companion as close as a spouse with whom to share his crosses. All his troubles must be carried in his own heart and borne on his own shoulders. If a man is afflicted, who will console him? If a woman is sick in bed, who will take care of her? Upon such considerations Solomon pronounced a “woe” upon a man who is alone (Eccl. 4:9-12). Henry Smith wrote of such a person: “Thoughts, and cares, and fears will come to him because he has none to comfort him, [just] as thieves steal in when the house is empty.”<sup>12</sup> A single person may have friends to help him in such times of need, but he lacks a companion as intimate as a spouse, a companion so close as to be *one* with him, who can provide comfort and solace.

A married man has a companion who enters his heart, partakes of all that happens to him, is touched by all his disasters, and does everything in her power to sweeten his condition, ease his mind, cheer his heart, and share his troubles. Husbands and wives can help one another in keeping troubles at bay; and when that proves impossible, they can help by bearing one another’s burdens, supplying each other’s wants, and being helpers to each other’s joy.<sup>13</sup> William Gouge said a spouse helps bring forth and raise children, helps in ordering prosperity and bearing adversity, helps in health and sickness, helps in all of life, and even helps in death, seeing it as the occasion of giving thanks to the Lord for the days and years they have spent together in helpful companionship.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, in the married estate we can expect “the greatest earthly comforts attainable in this life, even much spiritual comfort, if the yoke-fellows do truly fear God...so that they apply themselves to be helpful, and to do good, and give all lawful [satisfaction] unto each other, in all the good offices which they owe as husband and wife, and as heirs together of the same grace of life.”<sup>15</sup> That conviction moved Henry Scudder to inquire if there was a greater blessing than “to enjoy a meet help, one who may rejoice thy heart in this thy pilgrimage, one who may accompany thee, and cheer thee up in the way, when thou art treading many a weary step to the land of rest?”<sup>16</sup>

If this mutual helpfulness is so important and *primary* a purpose of the ordinance of marriage, then we would do well to know something of the duty incumbent on husbands and wives to give themselves to seeing that that purpose is fulfilled in their own marriages to the honor of God. We promise this help to each other in our marriage vows when we promise to be loving and faithful “in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, as long as we both shall live.” The Puritans called the duty of helpfulness *yoke-pulling*, because both husband and wife must put their shoulders together to bear their burdens and fulfill their callings. “Marriage,” said George Swinnock, “is called...a yoke, because married persons should draw evenly and equally, and thereby the load would be carried the more lightly.”<sup>17</sup> The idea, then, is that

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<sup>11</sup> Baxter, 46.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, 1:12.

<sup>13</sup> Scudder, 63–64.

<sup>14</sup> Gouge, 152–3.

<sup>15</sup> Scudder, 64.

<sup>16</sup> Scudder, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Swinnock, 1:478.

husband and wife are to help each other in whatever concerns them both, whether their bodies, their reputation, their family, or their belongings.<sup>18</sup>

### **The duty of helpfulness as it relates to the body**

First of all, then, this duty includes the mutual care we have of each other's bodies, to prevent sickness and, especially, to provide care and comfort during it. Days of sickness, adversity, sorrow, and loss must and will come in a marriage. And when they do, husband and wife must be a comfort and help to each other, doing all they can to assuage sorrow, ease pain, calm fears, settle hearts, and end misery.

But can a man fulfill this duty if he sees his wife burdened with sorrow and doesn't comfort her, or bent over with weakness and doesn't help her, or wearied with cares and doesn't relieve her? Can a woman fulfill this duty if she sees her husband sick and doesn't care for him, or in need and refuses to provide for him, or burdened and refuses to comfort him? Such behavior breaks the marriage vow, perverts one of the principal ends of marriage, and only makes: the burden heavier, the grief more grievous, and the pain more piercing. Did it not break Job's heart that when his wife was most needed as a helpmate she was most cold and behaved as a stranger to him (Job 2:9–10; 19:17)?

William Whately's counsel regarding this helpfulness in times of adversity is sobering. He wrote,

Sickness and weakness are things of themselves sufficiently tedious; there needs not the addition of the husband's or wife's unkindness, disrespecting, [and] grudging, to make the burden heavier. This is to add adversity to adversity and to [burden] one more that is already sinking under his load—a most barbarous and cruel unkindness! When the body faints, to make the heart faint also; when the limbs and joints are weak, to fill the soul with weakness, by grievous things being practiced from one so near, and [who owes] quite the contrary—this is verily murder in a high degree; like the kindness of men to their dogs, that when they be sick, will knock them on the head, and kill them out-right, to rid them of their pain. Wherefore let every husband or wife avoid or mend this fault, and look to their demeanor towards their yoke-fellow, especially in times of weakness, grief, and sickness.<sup>19</sup>

Such counsel may strike us as an overstatement. But Whately's comments appear right on target when we consider what John says in 1 John 3:14–18 about love for our brethren: “We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.” If this is our clear duty to our brethren, how much more is it our clear duty to our spouses! If we're to love one another in deed and in truth and thereby prove that the love and compassion of God dwells within us, then let our love and care be the medicine and ourselves the physicians in the times of our spouse's sorrow and sickness.

Isaac Ambrose related what he called “a most memorable and famous pattern” of this loving helpfulness in times of adversity:

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<sup>18</sup> According to the Puritans the greatest and primary concern of the mutual duty of helpfulness is with regard to each other's salvation. But I have chosen to deal with this as a separate category below.

<sup>19</sup> Whately, *A Bride Bush*, 68–69.

A young, tender, and beautiful Maid was matched... to a man stricken in years, whom after marriage she found to have a very fulsome and diseased body, full of many loathsome and contagious diseases. Yet notwithstanding, [believing] that by God's providence she [had] become his wife, she most worthily digested all with incredible patience. Friends and Physicians advised her by no means to come near him, and—for their parts—they utterly forsook him; but she... becomes to him in their stead, Friend, Physician, Nurse, Mother, Sister, Daughter, Servant, everything, anything to do him good [in] any manner of way. At last by extraordinary expense and excessive charges about him she came to some want of some necessaries, whereupon she sold her ring, chains, richest attire, plates, and choicest jewels. And when he was dead, and friends came about her, rather to congratulate her happy riddance, than to bewail her widowhood, she not only abhorred all speeches tending that way, but protested [that] if it were possible, she would willingly redeem her husband's life.<sup>20</sup>

Hence it appears, wrote Ambrose, "that this worthy woman was wedded to her husband's soul, not to his body, seeing no infirmity or deformity thereof could cool or weaken the fervency of her love."<sup>21</sup>

### **The duty of helpfulness as it relates to the name and reputation**

Each spouse is also to care for each other's name and reputation, both in their hearts as well as by what they say to others. In their hearts every married couple must nourish a good opinion of each other, believing in one another's faithfulness, honesty, purity, trustworthiness, loyalty, and love. If no ill report against a church elder is to be established except on the testimony of two or three witnesses (1 Tim. 5:19), then surely an ill report against one's spouse is not to be believed on any less. Rather, if a false report is heard, they should work together to be sure that they live rightly and with a clear conscience before God and man (2 Cor. 1:12), in Christian obedience and virtue (Eph. 4:25, 28–29).<sup>22</sup>

Also, to prevent being hurt by false reports and ensnared by jealousy, they should strive to nurture their love—which covers a multitude of sins, mollifies and mitigates blows, and puts the most favorable construction on every circumstance—such that he or she hopes the best, believes the best, and will not easily give way to contrary accusations. For as the duty of helpfulness springs from love, it's also tenderly careful to believe the best about each other without proof to the contrary (1 Cor. 13:4–7). A jealous spirit is quick to find fault, condemn, assume, and suspect, but the spirit of love is quite otherwise. Therefore this duty should make them hesitant to believe a bad report but rather defend each other's good name against bad reports from without and suspicions from within.

Caring for each other's names and reputations will also help prevent each other from being ill thought of by others, a kind of care which involves two things.<sup>23</sup> *First*, it requires that as much as possible husband and wife conceal each other's weaknesses from the eyes of others. William Secker put it this way: "Who would trample upon a jewel because it's fallen in the dirt? or throw away a heap of wheat for a little

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<sup>20</sup> Ambrose, *Works*, 236. Steele, *Puritans Sermons*, 2:292, referred to the same story in his sermon on marital duties and provided several details not related by Ambrose. The story was originally narrated by the Spanish humanist Joannes Ludovicus Vives. The woman's name was Clara Cerventa and her husband's name was Valdaura. The tender and loving care which Clara provided to her languishing husband lasted "ten long years." See Juan Luis Vives, *De Institutione Feminae Christianae, Liber Secundus et Liber Tertius*, ed. C. Fantazzi and C. Matheussen, trans. C. Fantazzi, *Selected Works of J. L. Vives VII* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 43–47.

<sup>21</sup> Ambrose, *Works*, 236.

<sup>22</sup> Gouge, 179–80.

<sup>23</sup> Whately, *A Bride Bush*, 76–81.

chaff? or despise a golden wedge because it retains some dross? ... Husbands and wives should provoke one another to love; and they should love one another [in spite of] provocation.”<sup>24</sup>

A husband must do his best to see that no one know his wife’s faults but God and himself. He should be unwilling to voice them to anyone but God, asking that she may be pardoned for them and reformed from them. Likewise, a wife must do her best to keep her husband’s struggles and sins to herself, as matters of prayer and not gossip. Neither spouse should be surprised by the sins of the other, for each of them is well aware of their own sins. Can it be helpful to uncover faults in public and fling mud in each other’s faces? Will this help a husband reform or a wife repent? And which is more displayed in such a case, the spouse’s faults and weaknesses or the gossip’s unkindness, indiscretion, backbiting, and folly? Does not the family dog behave better than this when it barks at strangers but not at family?<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, if ill speech behind the back of an enemy is a sin, how much more grievous is ill speech behind the back of a spouse, who is as our own flesh? Whately said, “To hear a husband largely declaiming against his wife, and...aggravating her sins, as if he took delight in nothing so much as in branding her forehead with the black mark of infamy—is a testimony of so much hatred, where there should be most love, and of so bitter unkindness, where nature itself requires most tender kindness—that no speeches almost can sound more harsh in the ears of wise men. So again for the woman to be clattering amongst her gossips what a foolish husband she has...and to be...making proclamation of his faults, as if she feared nothing but that they should *not* be known to people...is a most irksome and hateful folly and untrustworthiness.”<sup>26</sup>

Love for each other must strive to cover sins much as bandages cover sores, so that they may heal. Swinnock said, “to procure a quiet life, the husband must be deaf, and the wife blind. Sure it is, the man must not hear to declare it abroad, nor the wife see to say it among her gossips whatever is amiss at home, if they would live in peace.”<sup>27</sup> A breach between a husband and wife is half reconciled when it’s kept indoors where love and prayers can be repeatedly administered to it; but if it’s announced out of doors to the ears of others, it’ll be like a festering sore that can hardly be healed.<sup>28</sup>

Therefore the common practice of publishing each other’s faults must be put far away from a spouse because it’s a most treacherous evil and looks more like the hatred one might show to an enemy than the love promised in a marriage. “What mutual love can there be in such?” asked Gouge. “Howsoever their hands have been joined together, surely their hearts were never united, so that it had been better [if] they’d never known one another—unless the Lord do afterwards knit their hearts and unite their affections more nearly and firmly together.”<sup>29</sup> In extreme cases, it may be necessary to acquaint a close and trusted friend with the faults of one’s spouse for the purpose of prayer and sound counsel. But that’s very different than publishing the little flaws and idiosyncrasies to any company and for no other purpose than murmuring, complaining, and gossiping. “Know therefore, and practice this duty, O husbands and wives,” concluded Whately, “spit not in each other’s faces, disclose not each other’s faults; but conceal, hide, bury and cover them so much as truth and equity will allow.”<sup>30</sup>

*Secondly*, then, caring for each other’s name and reputation means keeping each other’s secrets. Scudder advised, “You must be so [yoked] to each other, that you may trust one another, and lock up

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<sup>24</sup> Secker, 263.

<sup>25</sup> Whately, *A Bride Bush*, 78.

<sup>26</sup> Whately, *A Bride Bush*, 77. Emphasis added.

<sup>27</sup> Swinnock, 1:476.

<sup>28</sup> Swinnock, 1:476.

<sup>29</sup> Gouge, 182.

<sup>30</sup> Whately, *A Bride Bush*, 79–80.

yourselves in one another's breasts, keeping each other's secrets, never blazing abroad the faults or frailties of each. True love can, and *will cover a multitude of sins* (1 Pet. 4:8). You must do with them as you will do with the sores of your own bodies, never uncover them, but when a bandage is to be laid upon them."<sup>31</sup> A wife and husband should enjoy the assurance that what they have entrusted to each other is safely locked away from others. Whately said spouses should be "good secretaries to each other,"<sup>32</sup> faithful to keep hidden and under lock, as precious jewels, what they've shared between themselves.

Otherwise, how can a man ever trust his wife or a wife trust her husband? And how can they not live at odds with each other when one or the other gives away those "jewels" to strangers? Was not Samson angry when the men got his secret from his wife (Judg. 14:18)? And did not Delilah prove her heart was cold when she badgered Samson for the secret of his strength only to tell it to his enemies (Judg. 16:16–21)? Therefore let a husband and wife entrust themselves to each other with openness and honesty, knowing that whatever is shared between them is safe.

### **The duty of helpfulness as it relates to the family**

As a third part of this mutual duty, helpfulness extends to a couple's family. If God graciously gives children to a couple, they must not only join together in giving thanks to the Lord but also in bringing those children up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:4). Secker wrote, "Children...are in a family as passengers in a boat; [and] husband and wife, they are as a pair of oars to row them to their desired haven."<sup>33</sup>

Their first and most important duty must be to see that the living God is worshiped in their home and to pray that the knowledge and fear of Him and of His Word may be planted in the hearts of their children. Neither father nor mother can work salvation in the hearts of their children (John 3:5); only God can do that. But He does expect parents to use the means He's appointed to fulfill the purposes of His election (Ps. 78:5–8; Deut. 6:7–9). Family worship, then, is a mutual responsibility of both husband and wife. They must work together to build up a godly family because it requires their full attention and united devotion.

They are to do this, first, by regularly and habitually performing holy duties with their children. Whately wrote, "To this end, they must read the Scriptures, call upon the name of God amongst [the children], and catechize them in the principles of true religion, that none under their roof may be ignorant of the fundamental truths of godliness, for want of their care to instruct them."<sup>34</sup> It's best if these duties are done together as a family and under the husband's spiritual leadership; but in his absence the wife should take the lead (Esth. 4:12–16). To ensure that such holy exercises are done daily, the husband and wife need to work together to keep them high on their priority list and set aside time for them, both for the glory of God and for the spiritual and eternal welfare of the family.

There will be many distractions and temptations to neglect family worship, so husband and wife will need to encourage each other to be faithful. Man is naturally prone to be short on service towards God; but has He not been abundant in blessing and provision? Then they ought to abound in worshiping Him. Do they want godly children? Then they must constantly instruct their children in the things of God and be dedicated to Him.

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<sup>31</sup> Scudder, 78–79.

<sup>32</sup> Whately, *A Bride Bush*, 81.

<sup>33</sup> Secker, 260.

<sup>34</sup> Whately, *A Bride Bush*, 89.

Moreover, they must catechize their children in the Christian faith,<sup>35</sup> examining them after hearing sermons to give an account of what they've learned, charging them to walk in God's ways (Gen. 18:19; Prov. 4:1–5; 1 Kings 2:1–2), and setting an example before them in their own lives.

Family worship must be joined to weekly public worship. The Christian Sabbath is to be remembered and sanctified as the Lord's Day by the entire family (Ex. 20:8). That will require due preparation for it on Saturday, ordering all secular affairs so they don't encroach upon the Sabbath, and making whatever preparations might be necessary to ensure the Lord's Day is a day of rest from non-essential work and play (Ex. 20:9–10). On that day, they must participate in whatever Christian education classes are available at church and faithfully attend both of the worship services, not only to help their family sanctify the Sabbath but also to teach their children to do the same with future generations (Ps. 78:5–7).

Therefore let every married couple work together to see that true religion is established and flourishes in their home so that they may have a church in their house (Rom 16:5; Ps. 101:2b). For it is better to have no family at all than to have one that is not dedicated to God and therefore brought up in the service of sin and for no other end than the pleasures, achievements, and applause of this life. Secker said of children, "Take heed lest these flowers grow in the devil's garden. Though you bring them out in corruption, yet do not bring them up to damnation.... While these twigs are green and tender, they should be [bent] towards God."<sup>36</sup>

In addition, husband and wife must also help each other in the *government* of their home. "They must be helpful one to another," wrote Scudder, "in overseeing, guiding, governing, and well-ordering the ways of [their] family."<sup>37</sup> Baxter advised, "Those who have a joint interest and are one flesh must have a joint part in government, though their power is not equal, and one may oversee some business, and the other another business. Yet, in their places they must divide the care and help each other."<sup>38</sup> By faithfully striving in prayer and in the proper use of biblical discipline they must work together to cherish and encourage godliness as well as to suppress the sin in their children's behavior, especially at its first risings (Eph. 6:4; Job 11:14).

That this is the duty of both husband and wife is clear in Scripture. In Proverbs 31:27 the virtuous wife is commended for looking after the ways of her household. In 1 Timothy 5:14, young widows are told to manage their households. In 1 Samuel 3:13 God judged Eli's house because he failed to restrain the wickedness of his sons. And in Genesis 18:19 God commended Abraham who would "command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice." Thus, to enjoy God's favor as Abraham did, a husband and wife must instruct their children in righteousness and restrain them from wickedness. The Lord promises that if they do so, their work will not be in vain, for He will bless it by building up their home (Job 8:6; 22:23).

Gouge said husbands and wives "may be very helpful one to another, and bring, by their mutual help in governing, much good to the family. The husband who helps his wife adds much authority to her, and so causes that she is not despised nor lightly esteemed. The wife by her help causes many things to be espied, and so redressed, which otherwise might never have been found out; for two eyes see more than one, especially when one of those is more at hand, and in presence, as the wife is in the house."<sup>39</sup>

### **The duty of helpfulness as it relates to the belongings**

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<sup>35</sup> Both the Heidelberg Catechism and the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms are excellent tools for this purpose.

<sup>36</sup> Secker, 259–60.

<sup>37</sup> Scudder, 80.

<sup>38</sup> Baxter, 148.

<sup>39</sup> Gouge, 186.



Lastly, helpfulness extends to a couple's belongings. They are to work together to increase and care for their estate and possessions. Gouge wrote, "We see it requisite, yea a bounden duty, that husband and wife, even in a mutual regard one of another, be as provident as they can be with a good conscience in getting, keeping, and disposing competent goods and riches for the mutual good one of another."<sup>40</sup> In many marriages most things are either "his" or "hers" and very few things are "ours." But God created the woman and brought her to the man (Gen. 2:22) to be his helpmate—which implies that he's to be her helpmate as well, since they're given to each other. In a marriage in which much of life, work, money, and vision are divided between spouses, the very purpose of helpfulness is thwarted. Such a marriage differs little from living together as roommates.

To honor God in marriage and enjoy the blessing of God upon a faithful marriage, there should be one house, one bed, one table, one purse, and one estate. All things should be in common. If a man and woman bring their hearts together in marriage, should they not also bring their hands and goods together in married life? Can they not accomplish more, go farther, and be more successful in their pursuits with twice the hands, twice the eyes, twice the ears, and twice the minds working together and moving towards the same end? Swinnock wrote, "Husbands and wives should [be]...like two watermen in oars, that row and labor together on their several sides to get, through God's blessing, an honest and comfortable living. They are a pitiful pair that, like a pair of cards, are much together, but it is at play [and] not at work."<sup>41</sup>

Whately said mutual care for a couple's belongings requires three things of the husband, in which he must be helped by his wife: work, saving, and planning; or, as he put it, "painfulness in getting, discretion in saving, [and] providence in fore-seeing. These [three] make up the virtue of good husbandry; and if any of these be wanting, so much is wanting from the perfection of it, and so much shall be wanting from their comfort and prosperity."<sup>42</sup> Whether or not the wife works outside the home is a matter of prayer and godly counsel. But the point is still the same: they must unite their efforts, draw the yoke together, and be partners in this work.

Likewise, they're to help each other save what money they can, both for retirement and for the unforeseen expenses which naturally arise in the life of a family. They must live within their means, practicing thriftiness and guarding against lavishness and luxury. Savings will enable them to show mercy and hospitality to the needy and the body of Christ as the Lord prescribes in Ephesians 4:28 (cf. 2 Cor. 9:11–12; 1 John 3:16–18). But how can they do so if the wife wastes what's brought into the home or the husband wastes it before it can be brought in? Would not this bring down the very house they desire to build up? Therefore they must refrain from needless or sinful expenses and use their money in a way that will enable them both to enjoy a good estate all their days and give a good account of themselves to the Lord as sharers with those in need.

Finally, they should jointly plan for future needs, prevent unnecessary losses, and faithfully bear all crosses. In such planning, four eyes can see more than two and four hands can do more than two. They must bring their minds and prayers together and plan for those seasons when provision may be sparse or when calamity may come. No one can foresee such things except the Lord, but prudence teaches us to anticipate such probabilities.

In conclusion, remember that helpfulness is a duty of married couples before the Lord. It's a work to be done unto the Lord, with an eye to His glory, and in full dependence upon His grace. Baxter made this point well: "Another duty of husbands and wives is to be helpful to each other in their worldly business and

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<sup>40</sup> Gouge, 182.

<sup>41</sup> Swinnock, 1:475.

<sup>42</sup> Whately, *A Bride Bush*, 83–84.

estates...not for worldly ends or with a worldly mind but in obedience to God, who will have them labor, as well as pray, for their daily bread, and has determined that in the sweat of their brows they shall eat their bread and that in six days they shall labor and do all that they have to do and that he who will not work must not eat [1 Tim. 5:8; Gen. 3:19; Ex. 20:9; 1 Thess. 3:10]. The care of their affairs lies upon them both, and neither of them must cast it off and live in idleness.”<sup>43</sup> What a comfort it should be to every married couple that if they do their work as unto the Lord (Col. 3:23), they will surely be able to lean on Him for help in their work (1 Cor. 15:58) and trust Him to bestow His richest blessings upon them for Christ’s sake (Pss. 84:11; 127:1). Let every marriage therefore seek to abound in the duty of helpfulness in temporal matters, as it concerns both their bodies, their name and reputation, their family, and their belongings.

### **The Duty of Helpfulness in Spiritual Matters**

Mutual helpfulness is also a duty in spiritual matters. In fact, this is its *chief area of concern*. Husbands and wives should be the *most* helpful to each other in their efforts to promote each other’s salvation and growth in grace. Gouge said the very best thing they can do for each other is “to be a means of helping forward [their] salvation.”<sup>44</sup> Swinnock said the mutual duty of helpfulness “must *principally* appear in their care for each other’s better part,”<sup>45</sup> that is, their souls. Baxter counseled that while husbands and wives are to faithfully help each other in all temporal matters, they are “*especially* to be helpers of each other’s salvation.”<sup>46</sup> Likewise, Ambrose called this helpfulness in spiritual matters “that *one necessary thing*, without which their family is but Satan’s seminary and a nursery for hell.”<sup>47</sup>

Establishing Christ’s kingdom in their home is to be their mutual concern. It is the greatest blessing when your chief promoter and encourager in your walk with Christ is your own spouse with whom you share all of life’s joys and trials that are ordered by God for your growth in grace.

The duty to be a help in spiritual matters is grounded upon the spiritual love a husband and wife are to have for each other. Spiritual love will seek a spiritual end for each other. A love which springs from God will seek, above all else, to help one’s spouse live closer to God. Such a love values the soul above the body, piety above policy, the inner beauty of godliness above the outward beauty of appearance, and does all it can for a spouse’s spiritual welfare. Marital love is grounded, not upon such things as affection, beauty, or riches, but upon God’s commanding the husband to love his wife (Eph. 5:25) and the wife to love her husband (Titus 2:4).

If their marital love is *spiritual*, having an eye to God, resting upon His will for marriage, yielding to His authority, and resolving to obey Him, then their union will be lasting, durable, and most helpful in each other’s spiritual and eternal welfare. Such love will take more pains to see their souls free from the dominion of sin and the wrath of God than their bodies free from poverty, sickness, or death. Indeed, such love will make them most careful to prepare for the endless eternity which follows their short marriage.

Consider the following thoughts from Baxter.<sup>48</sup> *First*, reflect on how inexplicable it would be to love each other and yet neglect each other’s souls. A person’s soul is his most treasured possession (Mark 8:36–

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<sup>43</sup> Baxter, 147.

<sup>44</sup> Gouge, 172.

<sup>45</sup> Swinnock, 1:479. Emphasis added.

<sup>46</sup> Baxter, *Works*, 4:234.

<sup>47</sup> Ambrose, 236.

<sup>48</sup> Baxter, 138–40.

37) and should therefore be the greatest concern in all our relationships. Can this be any truer than in marriage, where two have become one flesh? Of all people, husbands and wives have the greatest cause to make sure there's provision for their souls. If marital love doesn't include this most important matter, is it not worth very little? Can you love your husband's body and not care for his soul? Can you love your wife and yet leave her in the darkness of unbelief? What would you do to relieve her if she were in bodily pain or misery; what would you not spare in order to comfort her? And yet would you do nothing to deliver her from eternal misery and help her heavenward? As Baxter said, "Never say you love them if you will not labor for their salvation.... It does not deserve the name of love if it can leave a soul to endless misery."<sup>49</sup>

What can be said of those who do nothing to forward the salvation of their spouses and, sometimes, do many things to hinder it (Gen. 3:6; 1 Kings 11:4; Job 2:9; Acts 5:2)? "If your love to your wife or husband tends to no greater matters than the pleasures of this life while the soul is left to perish in sin, seriously consider how little more kindness you show them than the Devil [does]," said Baxter. "The Devil himself scarcely does more against the saving of souls than ungodly husbands and wives do against each other."<sup>50</sup> Steele wrote, "If you can suffer one another to be damned, where is your love?"<sup>51</sup>

*Second*, you will not fulfill the purpose for marriage if you do not help each other's souls. You're commanded to live together as heirs of the grace of life (1 Pet. 3:7). The husband in particular is appointed to love his wife so that he might present her acceptably to the Lord, having neither spot nor blemish (Eph. 5:25–27). If you only serve each other's bodily needs, how do you differ from the beasts of the field and birds of the air? If your greatest concern is to prepare your own soul for eternity, then the same concern should extend to the one whom you love as your own flesh.

Moreover, consider how painful it will be if you meet each other on judgment day having neglected to help each other to God. Therefore let husbands and wives resolve without delay to live together as heirs of heaven and encourage each other's salvation!

### **Two main concerns of helpfulness in spiritual matters**

A husband and wife are closer to each other than anyone else so they have the greatest opportunity to persuade and influence each other on all matters of life. This advantage is best used when they strive to help one another in matters of salvation. They do this by giving themselves to two main concerns: striving to warn each other against sin and stirring each other up to faith, love, and obedience in all good works.

*First*, as husband and wife, they cannot help but see each other's sins. They should feel compelled by love to make every effort to persuade the other to repent of those sins. If they're to be faithful in this mutual duty, "there ought to be a mutual care in husbands and wives, both to prevent sin before it be committed, and also to make what redress they can after it's committed."<sup>52</sup> While this pertains equally to the husband, Reyner said, "the wife should be a *second conscience* to her husband, a *bosom monitor*, to tell him privately of his faults, [and] to amend them."<sup>53</sup>

They're to observe the "temper and constitution" of each other's souls until they learn the sins to which they're prone. And having found them, Whately said, they must "diligently abstain from all things that may provoke them to evil and prove occasions of making them over-shoot themselves. And further, they must apply all means to weaken and enfeeble such corruptions, and to stop their over-flowing, that they may

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<sup>49</sup> Baxter, 138–39.

<sup>50</sup> Baxter, 138–39.

<sup>51</sup> Steele, *Puritans Sermons*, 2:279.

<sup>53</sup> Reyner, 27.

not proceed to any extremity, if they've begun to offend in some degrees."<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Smith said, "it's necessary to learn one another's natures, and one another's affections, and one another's infirmities, because you must be *helpers*, and you cannot help unless you know the disease."<sup>55</sup>

In other words, a couple must not foolishly provoke each other's weaknesses but join together in cutting off all occasions of temptation, and adopt, wherever they can, words and actions fit to heal and mitigate sin. If a husband is prone to anger, his wife should do everything she can to avoid provoking it and instead counter it with kindness and patience. If the wife is prone to fear, the husband should do what he can to prevent it and to bolster her faith in God's providence. In this way they're to be each other's watchman (Ezek. 3:17), each other's Aaron and Hur in the battle (Ex. 17:12), and each other's provocation to repentance and reformation (Heb. 10:24). For if sin is ignored in a marriage, it'll choke the grace of the Spirit (Gal. 5:17) and put it out as quickly as water does the fire—and without repentance, it'll bring the discipline of God upon them both.

Gouge wrote, "If a husband should see his wife, or a wife her husband lying in the fire, or water, ready to be burnt or drowned and not afford their best help to pull them out, might they not justly be thought to hate them? But sin *is* as fire and water, which will burn and drown men in perdition."<sup>56</sup> If a husband is content to let his wife sleep in her sin and keep silent about it, is this not hateful and cold-hearted? Does this not betray the marriage vow and add sin to sin? Let every husband and wife therefore beware of failing in this duty to which the Lord has called them. "Woe unto such husbands or wives," said Whately, and "sorry help is it that they afford to their married companions, and miserable helpers are they. God shall one day reckon with them for having done so little good where He appointed them to do all good; and so much hurt where He appointed them to do no hurt at all."<sup>57</sup>

Addressing sin in each other can be very difficult and so must be done with great care. For example, if the sin is anger, how can it be addressed without stirring it up? If the sin is pride, how can it be pointed out without suffering its blows? If the sin is unbelief, how can it be effectively removed? Consider therefore the following advice: let the *best time* be chosen to address it. Choose the time when your spouse appears to be most tender under the Spirit's preparatory hand and therefore most impressionable, approachable, and open to your counsel. Choose words that spring from humility and a sense of your own weaknesses—maybe even in the same area. *Precede* your gentle reproofs with what positive affirmation and encouragement you can give. And likewise, *conclude* your reproofs by affirming, if you can, your assurance that your spouse had good intentions and motives and meant well in the effort. Above all else, *pray* to God for the wisdom to rightly see your spouse's weaknesses, lovingly speak to them, and faithfully help to remedy them. For as Reyner said, "Happy is that couple whom God makes...spiritual physicians one to another."<sup>58</sup>

If your efforts appear to be ineffective and your spouse seems to be hardened to reproof, seek the help of trusted and wise friends, and possibly even the leaders in your church. If your husband was sick and you could not cure him, you would call for a doctor and ask for medicine, if not surgery. Likewise, in addressing the sin of a spouse, you must seek the help of those who are spiritual before the matter worsens (cf. Gal. 6:1–2). Meanwhile, you must continue to wait and pray, referring the matter to God, the only Physician of the soul, who is able in due season to set all things right. Also, know that you have discharged

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<sup>54</sup> Whately, *A Bride Bush*, 64.

<sup>55</sup> Smith, 1.23. Emphasis added.

<sup>56</sup> Gouge, 175. Emphasis added.

<sup>57</sup> Whately, *A Bride Bush*, 66.

<sup>58</sup> Reyner, 27.

your duty before God and can therefore enjoy the comfort of having been faithful to God and to your spouse, despite the outcome.<sup>59</sup>

*Second*, a couple must strive to provoke one another to godliness. They should be goads and spurs to one another, urging by tender entreaties and zealous example to draw from each other good works and spiritual duties. They should encourage each other in the faithful worship of God in public, in private, and as a family. They should behave as fellow pilgrims and travelers, walking hand in hand towards the Celestial City with that commitment to and love for each other which only a husband and wife can have.

For example, if the wife sees her husband is slack in generosity, she should strive to commend this duty to him and remind him of its excellence as a Christian virtue, of the great reward God promises to the cheerful giver, and of the example of their giving Savior. Likewise, if the husband sees his wife is backward in hospitality, he should stir her up to it by reminding her that Christ receives such labor as done unto Himself and by helping her prepare for company as well as clean up afterwards. All in all, husbands and wives should do all they can to increase the graces they see in each other.

We conclude with the concluding counsel of Richard Steele, who said, “Your work is to build-up one another in your most holy faith, and in all wisdom and holiness. And to that end, you ought carefully to watch over each other, lest at any time you fall into temptation; [you ought] to study each other’s dispositions, consider each other’s snares, observe each other’s decays in zeal and piety, that you may speedily supply remedies; and [you ought to] ‘exhort one another daily, lest either of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin’ [Heb. 3:13]. Your talk should often be of God and of your eternal estate; and you should improve that analogy which is between Jesus Christ and His church and the married couple, to your comfort and direction. In short, you should in both your carriages declare plainly that you are going together to seek a better country.”<sup>60</sup>

### **George Swinnock’s prayer to God for the grace of mutual helpfulness in marriage**

“Lord, who art the guide of all relations, and the God of all grace, be pleased to grant us affections suitable to our condition, that our whole carriage therein may be as becomes Christians, and such as are married to the Lord Christ; that as Abraham and Sarah, we may be famous for faith, as Isaac and Rebecca, we may live together in the dearest love; and that, as that pious pair, Zacharias and Elizabeth, we may walk in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord blameless, and we, walking in company, may walk the more cheerfully in the way which leads to everlasting life.

We wish that, as head and body, we may conspire for each other's welfare; and as we are one flesh, so we might have one spirit in seeking its real comfort, and endeavoring its lawful contentment. Domestic burdens will be more tolerable if we put under both our shoulders; personal hardships will be more acceptable while we conjoin in our help; the potion which is most bitter will go down the better if each drink a part. Oh that, as fellow-commoners, we might always eat of the same dish, whether sour or sweet; and since we are fellow-travelers, cheer up one another, to make our journey the more pleasant, till we come to rest in the true paradise! The head and body do not stand out against each other in terms of defiance. Christ and His church do not rise up in arms against each other in a warlike fashion. Lord, help us in our family affairs to live as those that draw in the same yoke, and in all our civil and natural concernments to bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

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<sup>59</sup> Whately, *A Bride Bush*, 64–65.

<sup>60</sup> Steele, *Puritans Sermons*, 2:279.

We wish, above all things, that we may, with the greatest faithfulness, be serviceable to each other's souls; and while others conspire together to indulge their flesh, and like Ananias and Sapphira, to tempt God, we may conspire together to live after the Spirit, and with the greatest advantage to exercise ourselves to godliness, that we may both, like the two cherubim, look one to another, and both towards thy mercy-seat. And oh do Thou, who sittest between the cherubim, meet us, and commune with us now, that at last we may meet at Thy seat of mercy. Yet a little while and the light is with us; yet a little while and we may pray together, and we may fast together, and we may read together; within a few days the shadows of the evening will stretch themselves upon us, and it will be no longer day with us. Oh that we might be so far from living like those beasts, who mind little save bedding and boarding together, that we may, like angels, always stand in God's presence, and join in admiring His boundless perfections! Lord, let us not, like Herod and Herodias, join together against Thy saints; nor, as Herod and Pilate, agree together against our Savior, lest at last we burn together in the unquenchable fire. But let us take sweet counsel together, and go often to the house of God, and to the throne of grace in company; and do so assist us, that our house now may be a Bethel, none other than the house of God; and when this fast knot betwixt us shall be untied by the king of terrors, we may be more closely united to the King of saints, in that place where there is neither marriage nor giving in marriage, but all are as angels, bathing their souls in the rivers of Thy pleasures, and warming their hearts in Thy bosom and embraces. Oh, if there be such a help in a fit spouse, what a heaven is there in marriage to Thy dear Son! If converse with flesh and blood yield such comfort, what infinite delight, and unconceivable consolation will flow from immediate, uninterrupted, and eternal communion with Thy blessed self! Oh, blessed are they that are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!

Lord, enable us (husband and wife) to shine as the sun and moon, and our children and servants as stars, so gloriously and powerfully with the light of holiness, that our house may be Thy lesser heaven, and that when we have finished our courses, by declaring Thy glory in our several relations, and showing forth Thy spiritual handiworks in our whole conversations, we may be elevated to those higher orbs, and heavenly mansions, where we shall never set, be eclipsed, or clouded; where the light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun as the light of seven days; where the crosses and encumbrances of all relations shall be removed, and the true comfort only of them all remain, yea, where the light of all relations shall be swallowed up, as the lesser celestial lights in the sun, in our great relation to God through Christ. For there “the sun shall no more be our light by day, nor the moon our light by night, but the Lord our God, our everlasting light, and our God our glory.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Swinnock, 1:481-87.