

# Pastoral Advice on Marital Strife: Wisdom from Two Millennia of Christian Thinkers<sup>1</sup>

**ROBERT L. PLUMMER & MATTHEW D. HASTE**

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**Robert L. Plummer** is Chairman of the New Testament Department and Professor of New Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he also earned his PhD in New Testament. Dr. Plummer has written numerous articles in such journals as *Westminster Theological Journal*, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, *New Holman Bible Dictionary*, and *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*. He has written or edited several books, including *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible* (Kregel, 2010), *Journeys of Faith* (Zondervan, 2012), *Paul's Missionary Methods* (co-edited, InterVarsity Press, 2012), *The Story of Scripture* (Kregel, 2013), *Understanding the Bible* (Kregel, 2013). In addition, Dr. Plummer has co-authored *Held in Honor: Wisdom for Your Marriage from Voices of the Past* (with Matthew Haste, Christian Focus, 2015) and *Going Deeper with New Testament Greek* (B&H, 2016). Dr. Plummer is founder and host of The Daily Dose of Greek screencast.

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**Matthew D. Haste** is Associate Professor of Ministry Studies at Columbia International University Seminary and School of Ministry, Columbia, SC. He earned his PhD from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is the co-author with Robert Plummer of *Held in Honor: Wisdom for Your Marriage from Voices of the Past* (Christian Focus, 2015). Dr. Haste also serves as Pastor of Preaching at Midland Church, Columbia, SC.

## INTRODUCTION

Most modern evangelical books on marriage are like meteors—they flash brilliantly out of the dark heavens for a brief moment—only to be swallowed up by the black canvass of forgetfulness as we await the next shooting star of

the Christian publishing industry. The fact is, evangelical advice on marriage is often trendy, trite, and thus, after a few years, out-of-print.

As a pastor, as well as professor, I (Robert) have been struck by the high percentage of Christian marriages that struggle to maintain unity, love, and commitment. Yet, should I be surprised? If I am honest about my own marriage, I can think of many struggles, disappointments, and conflicts that my wife and I have faced. As one prominent Christian pastor once remarked to me about the marriages described in the Bible, “Every one of them is dysfunctional.”

As I have counseled married couples both at my seminary and at my local church, one common theme that encourages struggling couples is to learn of the marital struggles of others. Ironically, it is life-giving to know that disagreement and disappointment in marriage are both normal and expected (though not without sin). In my memory, I can see the look of relief on young couples’ faces as I said to them, “My wife and I have had similar challenges in our marriage.” How comforting I found it to read books like that of John Piper’s or Tim Keller’s and discover that such modern spiritual giants are also fallible husbands.

It was these experiences, I believe, that first led me to consider not just seeking one pastor’s advice, or several influential modern Christians’ testimonies about marriage, but two-thousand years of the church witnessing to the struggles, joys, and purposes of marriage. Ultimately, Matthew Haste partnered with me in this endeavor to produce a devotional entitled *Held in Honor: Wisdom for Your Marriage from Voices of the Past*.<sup>2</sup>

The book contains fifty poignant instructions about marriage spread evenly throughout Church History—from the Patristic, Medieval, Reformation, Puritan, and Modern Evangelical eras—including the likes of Ignatius to Augustine, Martin Luther to Richard Baxter, Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Elisabeth Elliott. Though sometimes less clearly (e.g., the Medieval period), the church has always borne witness to the holy and good purposes of God in marriage—particularly, as a picture of Christ’s unwavering love for the church and the church’s commitment to Christ. And, the church always bore witness to the struggles of marriage—for when two sinners are wed (which includes every marriage) there is sure to be difficulty, conflict, disappointment, and sin.

This article will focus on some of the specific advice that Christian theologians have given throughout church history on marital strife—that is, on

the conflict between man and woman in marriage. Indeed, G. K. Chesterton said memorably:

The differences between a man and a woman are at the best so obstinate and exasperating that they practically cannot be got over unless there is an atmosphere of exaggerated tenderness and mutual interest. To put the matter in one metaphor, the sexes are two stubborn pieces of iron; if they are to be welded together, it must be while they are red hot. Every woman has to find out that her husband is a selfish beast, because every man is a selfish beast by the standard of a woman. But let her find out the beast while they are both still in the story of “Beauty and the Beast.” Every man has to find out that his wife is cross—that is to say, sensitive to the point of madness; for every woman is mad by the masculine standard. But let him find out that she is mad while her madness is more worth considering than anyone else’s sanity.<sup>3</sup>

We will consider the instructions of five historical figures about marital conflict selected from the fifty quotes in our book. The benefit of this historical survey is threefold: (1) the survey poignantly reminds us that marriages will always struggle in this broken world; (2) the survey shows us that the church has consistently spoken with clarity, boldness, and pastoral sensitivity to preserve and strengthen marriages; (3) the five particular quotes stress similar issues in marriage and thus provide a reliable starting point for providing pastoral counsel that is neither trite nor trendy.

### ***Opus Imperfectum* (c. 400)**

*Opus Imperfectum* is the Latin name given to an incomplete commentary on the book of Matthew that was formerly attributed to John Chrysostom (347-407). Scholars have rejected Chrysostom’s authorship since the sixteenth century and now consider the book to be the work of an unidentified fifth-century church leader. Although the commentary is incomplete (addressing only about two-thirds of the Gospel) and bears some marks of aberrant theological influences, it provides helpful insights on particular passages. The quote below, taken from the author’s comments on Matthew 5:32, illustrates his desire to prevent couples from pursuing divorce.<sup>4</sup>

But you say, “My wife has many faults.” What? You yourself are without fault?

If we ought to bear with the imperfections of those outside our family, as the apostle says, “Bear with one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” [Gal 6:2], how much more ought we to bear the imperfections of our wives?<sup>5</sup>

As broken and sin-stained humans, we are creative at justifying our transgressions. We reinterpret God’s Word so as to make it less uncomfortable for us. For example, a consistent teaching of Scripture is that we are to bear the inconvenience of others’ failings and demands—“bear one another’s burdens”—so that we might live as Christ’s Spirit-led people—“and so fulfill the law of Christ” [Gal 6:2]. Yet, we somehow think it is acceptable to grumble over the burdens we must bear from our spouses. In this quote, the author of the *Opus Imperfectum* gives a reminder that for every fault you find in your spouse, he or she could rightly point out a flaw in you!

The gospel of Jesus Christ challenges this kind of sinful scorekeeping. As God has extended His undeserved grace towards us in Christ, so we are to extend it to others (Eph 4:32). To not offer forgiveness to those who have offended us is to call into question whether we truly know the forgiveness of the Heavenly Father (1 John 3:14-15). We readily counsel our children about forgiving the classmate who is teasing them. We expect our pastor not to lash out at difficult people at the congregational meeting. We sit in silent disapproval towards the bitter aunt who complains about her daughter. Yet, we ignore our own lack of love, grace, and forgiveness towards the husband or wife God has given us as our most intimate companion. Forgive others seventy-seven times? Of course! But, concerning our husband or wife, we think, “Here we go again . . . Do that one more time, and I’ll . . .”

We see in the *Opus Imperfectum* that sinful husbands and wives struggled with critical spirits towards their spouses in the 5th century, just as married couples struggle through the same issue today. One effective pastoral strategy for developing compassion, forgiveness, and empathy towards others is understanding how much forgiveness we ourselves have received (from God and others) and need to receive daily.

I need the *Opus Imperfectum* to remind me that I personally *am* an *opus imperfectum*. And, if I’ve experienced the grace of God in my imperfections—and if I inflict my imperfections upon others daily—how I cannot likewise bear in love the imperfections they have, especially that most intimate companion of a spouse?

## GREGORY THE GREAT (540–604)

Born into a wealthy family, Gregory the Great left a promising career in politics to become a monk.<sup>6</sup> After several years of the monastic life, he was elected pope. Although he was at first reluctant to take the position, he eventually transformed the office and cast a long shadow over the papacy throughout the Middle Ages. The following excerpt is taken from his *Book of Pastoral Rule* (c. 590), which was written to guide bishops in their personal conduct and to instruct them in their ministry to others.

Husbands and wives are to be admonished, that those things wherein they sometimes displease one another they bear with mutual patience, and by mutual exhortations remedy. For it is written, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). For the law of Christ is charity; since it has from Him bountifully bestowed on us its good things, and has patiently borne our evil things. We, therefore, then fulfill by imitation the law of Christ, when we both kindly bestow our good things, and piously endure the evil things of our friends. They are also to be admonished to give heed, each of them, not so much to what they have to bear from the other as to what the other has to bear from them. For, if one considers what is borne from one’s self, one bears more lightly what one endures from another.<sup>7</sup>

Like the *Opus Imperfectum*, Gregory the Great reminds us that a successful, happy marriage is partly found in embracing your Christian duty to bear with the burdens your spouse causes you. The last part of Gregory’s instructions are, in essence, an application of Jesus’ command, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 19:19).

A wife might respond, “How can I love my husband when he won’t change? Everyday it’s the same annoying habits. I wonder if the children will grow up to be losers like him.” A husband might reply, “How can I love her when she is so infuriating? She’s an emotional train wreck, constantly sapping my energy and time. Think about the success I could be in work or ministry if it weren’t for my wife!”

So, you cannot love your spouse because he/she is so undeserving? Well, look to the way you love yourself as a model. In Jesus’ command to love one’s neighbor, He assumes we love ourselves and then commands us to

love others in that same pattern. Or, as Gregory the Great points out, we are constantly offending and sinning against others. How grateful we are that they bear with us and do not lash out in anger or resentment. We are glad they give us a second chance—and if they do not, we think they should.

We are called to love others in the same way we love ourselves. Most people really do love themselves. Think about it: when given the chance, you choose what you consider to be best for yourself. You hope the best for yourself, and even though you are not what you want to be, you give yourself a second chance . . . and then a third chance . . . fourth chance . . . and so on.

C. S. Lewis pointed out this tendency in his classic work, *Mere Christianity*. On the old saying, “hate the sin but not the sinner,” Lewis writes, “For a long time I used to think this a silly, straw-splitting distinction: how could you hate what a man did and not hate the man? But years later it occurred to me that there was one man to whom I had been doing this all my life—namely myself.”<sup>8</sup> In some marriage counseling situations, it could be helpful, like Gregory, to point out that many spouses are failing to extend to each other the most basic Christian love.

Let’s make it personal: What if you extended true neighbor love to *your* spouse? Perhaps your spouse is so conditioned to your disapproval that it will take some time to convince him/her that you are sincere. Your negative attitude may really be the main problem. Do you stew about the “speck” in your spouse’s eye while you have a log sticking out of your own eye (Matt 7:3-5)?

Gregory reminds us: (1) as sinful spouses our tendency is to nitpick; (2) Christ empowers and calls us to bear and forgive; and (3) failure to love as God commands is at the root of most, if not all, marital disputes. When the disciples of Jesus love others, the light of the new age shines in the darkness (1 John 2:8). What of your own words and actions today will reveal the light of the coming age shining through your marriage and home?

### **DESIDERIUS ERASMUS (1466-1536)**

We turn now to the Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus.<sup>9</sup> While his 1516 print edition of the Greek New Testament is his most well-known contribution to the church, he was also appreciated in his own day for his wisdom

and wit in practical theology. The following conversation is excerpted from a fictional dialogue between two troubled women discussing how to navigate a difficult marriage. According to the older of the two, a woman ought to weigh a man's faults before she marries him, but once married, it is "time for improving him, not blaming him." This dialogue provides a helpful representation of how Erasmus might have counseled women in a troubled marriage.

*Eulalia:* Greetings, Xanthippe! I've been dying to see you.

*Xanthippe:* Same to you, my dearest Eulalia. You look lovelier than ever.

*Eulalia:* So you greet me by making fun of me right away?

*Xanthippe:* Not at all. I mean it.

*Eulalia:* Maybe this new dress flatters my figure.

*Xanthippe:* Of course it does. I haven't seen anything prettier for a long time.

British cloth, I suppose?

*Eulalia:* British wool with Venetian dye.

*Xanthippe:* Softer than satin: What a charming shade of purple! Where did you get such a marvelous gift?

*Eulalia:* Where should honest wives get them except from their husbands?

*Xanthippe:* Lucky you to have such a husband! As for me—I might as well have married a mushroom when I married my Nicholas ... [Xanthippe goes on to complain about her husband.]

*Eulalia:* Hush! You bring reproach on yourself when you reproach your husband.

*Xanthippe:* Hope to die if I wouldn't rather sleep with a brood sow than with such a husband!

*Eulalia:* Don't you welcome him with abuse then?

*Xanthippe:* Yes—as he deserves. He finds I'm no mute!

*Eulalia:* What does he do to counter you?

*Xanthippe:* At first he used to talk back most ferociously, thinking he'd drive me away with harsh words.

*Eulalia:* The bickering never came to actual blows?

*Xanthippe:* Once, at least, the argument grew so hot on both sides that it very nearly ended in a fight.

*Eulalia:* You don't say so!

*Xanthippe:* He was swinging a club, yelling savagely all the while and threatening terrible deeds.

*Eulalia:* Weren't you scared at that?

*Xanthippe:* Oh, no. When it came my turn, I grabbed a stool. Had he laid a finger on me, he'd have found I didn't lack arms ... If he won't treat me as a wife, I won't treat him as a husband.

*Eulalia:* But Paul teaches that wives should be obedient to their husbands in all subjection. And Peter sets before us the example of Sarah, who would call her husband Abraham, "lord."

*Xanthippe:* So I've heard. But this same Paul teaches that husbands should cherish their wives as Christ has cherished his spouse the Church. Let him remember his duty and I'll remember mine.

*Eulalia:* All the same, when things have come to such a pass that one person must yield to the other, the wife should give way to the husband.

*Xanthippe:* Provided he deserves to be called husband. He treats me like a servant.

*Eulalia:* But tell me, my dear Xanthippe, did he stop threatening to beat you after that?

*Xanthippe:* Yes—and he was wise to do so or he'd have got a cudgeling.

*Eulalia:* But haven't you stopped brawling with him?

*Xanthippe:* No, and I won't stop.

*Eulalia:* What does he do all the time?

*Xanthippe:* Do? Sometimes he sleeps, the lazy loafer. Occasionally he just laughs; and at other times grabs his guitar, which has hardly three strings, and plays it as loud as he can to drown out my screaming.

*Eulalia:* That infuriates you?

*Xanthippe:* More than I could say. At times I can hardly keep my hands off him.

*Eulalia:* Xanthippe, my dear, may I speak rather frankly with you?

*Xanthippe:* You may...

*Eulalia:* Whatever your husband's like, bear in mind that there's no exchanging him for another ... There's nothing left now but to try to live in harmony by adjusting yourselves to each other's habits and personalities.

*Xanthippe:* Can I reform him?

*Eulalia:* What sort of men husbands are depends not a little on their wives.

*Xanthippe:* Do you get along well with your husband?

*Eulalia:* Everything's peaceful now.

*Xanthippe:* There was some turmoil at first, then?

*Eulalia:* Never a storm, but slight clouds appeared occasionally; the usual human experience. They could have caused a storm had they not been met with forbearance. Each of us has his own ways and opinions, and—to tell the truth—his own

peculiar faults. If there's any place where one has a duty to recognize these, not resent them, surely it's in marriage.

*Xanthippe:* Good advice.

*Eulalia:* It frequently happens, however, that good will between husband and wife breaks down before they know each other well enough. This above all is to be avoided, for once contention arises love is not easily recovered, especially if the affair reaches the point of harsh abuse. Things glued together are easily separated if you shake them immediately, but once the glue has dried they stick together as firmly as anything. Hence at the very outset no pains should be spared to establish and cement good will between husband and wife. This is accomplished mainly by submissiveness and courtesy, for goodwill won merely by beauty of person is usually short-lived.

*Xanthippe:* But tell me, please, by what arts you draw your husband to your ways.

*Eulalia:* I'll tell you in order that you may imitate them ... My first concern was to be agreeable to my husband in every respect, so as not to cause him any annoyance. I noted his mood and feeling; I noted the circumstances too, and what soothed and irritated him ... When he's at leisure and not disturbed, worried, or tipsy ... admonish him politely, or rather entreat him—in private—to take better care of his property, reputation, or health in one respect or another. And this very admonition should be seasoned with wit and pleasantries ... After reproving him as I intended, I'd break off that talk and turn to other, more cheerful topics. For as a rule, my dear Xanthippe, our mistake is that once we've started to talk we can't stop.

*Xanthippe:* So they say.

*Eulalia:* Above all I was careful not to scold my husband in the presence of others or to carry any complaint farther than the front door. Trouble's sooner mended if it's limited to two. But if something of this sort does prove intolerable, or can't be cured by the wife's reproof, it's more polite for her to take her complaint to her husband's parents and relatives than to her own, and to state her case with such restraint that she won't seem to hate her husband but his fault instead. She should refrain from blurting out everything, though, so that her husband may tacitly acknowledge and admire his wife's courtesy.

*Xanthippe:* Whoever could do all this must be a philosopher.

*Eulalia:* Oh, no. By such practices we'll entice our husbands to similar courtesies. [Eulalia begins to share examples of when this has worked.]

*Eulalia:* I know you're acquainted with Gilbert the Dutchman.

*Xanthippe*: I know him.

*Eulalia*: As you're aware, when he was in the prime of life he married a woman already in her declining years.

*Xanthippe*: Perhaps he married the dowry, not the wife.

*Eulalia*: Yes. Despising his wife, he doted on a mistress with whom he would often enjoy himself away from home. He seldom lunched or dined at home. What would you have done in this situation?

*Xanthippe*: What? I'd have flown at his sweetheart's hair; and when my husband was going to her, I'd have emptied the chamber pot on him, so he'd be perfumed for his party.

*Eulalia*: But how much more sensible this woman was! She invited the girl to her home and received her cordially. Thus she enticed her husband home too, without sorcery. And whenever he went out to dinner at the girl's, she sent over some fancy dish, bidding them have a good time.

*Xanthippe*: I'd rather die than be bawd to my husband.

*Eulalia*: But consider the case. Wasn't this far better than if she had simply alienated her husband by her fury and spent her whole time in brawling? [After another example, Xanthippe is ready for some advice.]

*Xanthippe*: What would you have me to do, then?

*Eulalia*: First of all, keep to yourself any wrong your husband does you and win him over gradually by favors, cheerfulness, gentleness. Either you'll triumph at last or certainly you'll find him much more affable than you do now.

*Xanthippe*: He's too savage to soften under any favors.

*Eulalia*: Oh, don't say that. No creature's so fierce he can't be tamed. Don't despair of the man. Try for several months; blame me if you don't find this advice has helped you. There are even some failings you ought to wink at. Above all, in my judgment, you must be careful not to start an argument in the bedroom or in bed, but try to see that everything there is pleasant and agreeable. If that place, which is dedicated to dispelling grudges and renewing love, is profaned by any contention or bitterness, every means of recovering goodwill is clean gone ... [In doing so,] you spoil the very medicine that could have cured [your husband's] ills. [After some additional advice about the importance of maintaining healthy intimacy, Eulalia concludes her advice as follows.]

*Eulalia*: He's yours whether you like it or not; that's settled. The better you make him, the better off you'll be. You have eyes only for his failings. These intensify your disgust, and with this handle you're simply catching him where he can't

be held. Mark the good in him, rather, and by this means take him where he can be held. The time to weigh his faults was before you married him, since a husband should be chosen not only with eyes, but with ears too. Now's the time for improving him, not blaming him.<sup>10</sup>

### **RICHARD BAXTER (1615-1691)**

We turn now to the pastoral counsel of a Puritan. For almost twenty years, Richard Baxter pastored a Nonconformist congregation in Kidderminster, England, where his ministry was instrumental in transforming the town.<sup>11</sup> His classic work *Christian Directory* (1654) addressed a host of practical topics related to piety, including the following tips for helping Christian couples avoid dissension.

1. Keep up your conjugal love in a constant heat and vigour.
2. Both husband and wife must mortify their pride and passion, which are the causes of impatience; and must pray and labour for a humble, meek, and quiet spirit.
3. Remember still that you are both diseased persons, full of infirmities; and therefore expect the fruit of those infirmities in each other.
4. Remember still that you are one flesh; and therefore be no more offended with the words or failings of each other, than you would be if they were your own.
5. Agree together beforehand, that when one is in the diseased, angry fit, the other shall silently and gently bear, till it be past and you are come to yourselves again.
6. Look before you, and remember that you must live together until death.
7. As far as you are able, avoid all occasions of wrath and falling out, about the matters of your families.
8. If you cannot quickly quench your passion, yet at least refrain your tongues.
9. Let the sober party condescend to speak fairly and to entreat the other.
10. Confess your fault to one another, when passion has prevailed against you; and ask forgiveness of each other, and join in prayer to God for pardon.<sup>12</sup>

The Bible is full of practical instruction about how to live together in unity, love and wisdom with other humans—despite being a sinner living in a broken world. Richard Baxter's advice provides a nice synthesis of several practical biblical teachings on relationships and reiterates some of the central

themes mentioned in the previous quotes.

Like the other theologians we have looked at, Baxter encourages his readers to assume that conflict will arise in the context of marriage. He reminds them that pride is the root of conflict rather than the specific circumstances in which they find themselves. Pride is not provoked by others but is the overflow of what Baxter calls “the diseased temper of the heart.”<sup>13</sup>

Wise couples will recognize that they have married a fellow sinner and commit to bear with one another in love. Baxter compares our spiritual infirmities to physical handicaps and asks, “If you had married one that is lame, would you be angry with her for halting?”<sup>14</sup> Likewise, Christians must commit to bear with sinning spouses and show mercy as ones who are guilty as well.

One unique contribution that Baxter makes to this brief survey is his advice that deals specifically with our words. Baxter recognizes that the sinful heart is the cause of conflict but that much strife will manifest itself in the form of sinful speech. As the Proverbs remind us, “Where words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise” (Prov 10:19, NIV). This is an especially dangerous warning for married couples because you inevitably spend so much time talking to one another.

Richard Baxter reminds us that perhaps one of the healthiest things we can do for our marriages is to ask for God’s grace to speak less. Though our hearts continue to think of hurtful things (and the devil may whisper such thoughts in our ears), we are called to resist the temptation to tear one another down with our words. As the Puritan divine put it, “If you cannot quickly quench your passion, yet at least refrain your tongues.”<sup>15</sup> Such advice would go a long way in helping us all to avoid strife in our marriages. It is consistent with Paul’s admonition to the Ephesians, “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear” (Eph 4:29, ESV). Let us pray for such restraint in our words and labor toward an awareness of our own selfish pride.

### **ELISABETH ELLIOT (1926-2015)**

Our final quote comes from Elisabeth Elliot, the beloved twentieth-century author and missionary who passed away this summer. In the quote below,

Elliot speaks frankly about the realities of married life and warns of the dangers that young couples face beyond the honeymoon.

A honeymooning couple may be so dazzled with love that they fail to notice peculiarities which will soon surprise them. The return from the honeymoon begins the knotty matters of the four B's: bedroom, bathroom, breakfast and budget. They may be in for a painful jolt when they find that patience must do its perfect work. He wants the windows open at night, she wants them closed. He fires his towel over the rack from the other side of the bathroom. She wants towels neatly folded to show the monograms. He shoulders his way to the mirror to shave, can't fathom how she can take such ages with her hair. Alas. What revelations begin to surface! He's used to stretching his frame diagonally across the bed, which consigns her to a triangle. But, bless his heart, the next morning he helps her make the bed—his mother told him it's easy with two. Suppose he showers and she bathes—will there be enough hot water for both? Somebody must make the coffee. Will he/she make it "right?" He expects country ham, two eggs, grits and hot biscuits, while she somehow manages on a piece of dry toast. Then, within a short time, one of them discovers that the other has no idea whatsoever about the use of money, a major setback ... A bridegroom chooses to marry a woman because he loves her. Now he must choose to *love* her because he *married* her. He ought to cherish this responsibility and thank God daily for His gift.<sup>16</sup>

Hardly anyone realizes the depth of what they are promising on their wedding day. In our modern world, few consider the weightiness of marriage—even in the church. If we are to be true to the Scriptures and truly helpful to the world though, we must do more than simply fight for the proper definition of marriage. We must preserve the sacredness of marriage by acknowledging the strength it yields.

In marriage, we make lifelong commitments to one another. There are times when our zeal for each other and red-hot affection will make those promises seem easy to keep. At other times, our vows keep us. We lean on them in a gritty, almost unromantic kind of way, recognizing that we must go on—not because we want to or feel like it in the moment but because we said we would.

Feelings, however, often follow deeds. If, by the power of God's Spirit, you act lovingly toward your spouse, you may be surprised to wake up one day

and discover accompanying emotions. Similarly, if you indulge in spiteful reactions, you will find yourself sinking into a cesspool of negativity.

Elisabeth Elliot points us toward the sacredness of marriage and its life-giving power. “A bridegroom chooses to marry a woman because he loves her. Now he must choose to *love* her because he *married* her.” Our vows are not empty promises. They are the firm foundation upon which, by God’s grace, two people build their future together despite their differences.

## CONCLUSION

In this brief survey, we have examined a chorus of voices, individually drawn from historical periods hundreds of years apart and yet in relative harmony, melodiously testifying to the mysterious purposes of God in marriage. One thinks of the words of Agur, recorded in Proverbs 30, “There are three things that are too wonderful for me, four that I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship in the sea, *and the way of a man with a woman.*” (Prov 30:18-19, NET)

Indeed, how mysterious and wonderful is the way of a man with a woman in holy matrimony. Even as the journey of marriage can bring one through dark valleys of difficulty, it remains a sacred commitment, defined by God and central to His purposes in the world.

We noted three benefits of this survey at the outset of this article: (1) These quotes poignantly remind us that marriages will always struggle in this broken world; (2) The theologians we heard from demonstrate that the church has consistently spoken with clarity, boldness, and pastoral sensitivity to preserve and strengthen marriages; and finally, (3) These five particular quotes stress similar issues in marriage, thus providing a reliable starting point for pastoral counsel that is neither trite nor trendy. All five theologians recognized the inevitability of conflict in marriage, the call to bear with one another, and pointed to the permanency of marriage as grounds for faithfulness. Each counseled couples in conflict toward showing grace to each other, reminding them of their common sinful natures and their calling to maintain the marriage covenant. This begs several questions for pastors and Christian leaders to reflect upon in closing.

Are you holding up the sacred commitments of marriage in your own sermons and lectures? Do you ever undermine these commitments with

subtle jokes and ill-advised humor? Does your counseling provide the same depth of instruction and conviction as your forbearers? Do you prepare young husbands and wives for conflict and equip them to forgive one another? In your own home, are you living out each day with your spouse as if more than just your own reputation is on the line? May we learn from the wisdom of the past and may our marriages be strengthened today that this sacred institution would be held in honor for generations to come.

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- <sup>1</sup> The following article was originally presented at the 2015 Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society.
  - <sup>2</sup> Robert L. Plummer and Matthew D. Haste, *Held in Honor: Wisdom for Your Marriage from Voices of the Past* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2015).
  - <sup>3</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Common Man* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1950), 142–143.
  - <sup>4</sup> In Matthew 5:32, Jesus said, “But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”
  - <sup>5</sup> “The Twelfth Homily: On Matthew 5,” in *Incomplete Commentary on Matthew (Opus Imperfectum)* (James A. Kellerman, trans.; Ancient Christian Texts, Thomas C. Oden and Gerald L. Bray, eds.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 104. The InterVarsity Press volume was the first translation of *Opus Imperfectum* into English and includes a helpful introduction to the work.
  - <sup>6</sup> For an introduction to Gregory, see John Moorhead, *Gregory the Great* (London: Routledge, 2005).
  - <sup>7</sup> Gregory the Great, *The Book of Pastoral Rule 2.26* (James Barmby, trans.; Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1889, repr. 2004), 12:56–57.
  - <sup>8</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; repr., New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 117.
  - <sup>9</sup> For more on Erasmus, Roland H. Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1969).
  - <sup>10</sup> Erasmus, “The Wife Blaming Her Marriage” in *The Colloquies* (1518). Translation taken from Dana Mack and David Blankenhorn, ed., *The Book of Marriage. The Wisest Answers to the Toughest Questions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), 99–106.
  - <sup>11</sup> For a brief introduction to the life and ministry of Richard Baxter, see N. H. Keeble, “Baxter, Richard (1615–1691),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 4:418–33.
  - <sup>12</sup> Richard Baxter, *A Christian Directory in The Practical Works of Richard Baxter* (1846; repr., Grand Rapids: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2008), 1:433–34. Each of Baxter’s ten directives have been annotated.
  - <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:433.
  - <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
  - <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:434.
  - <sup>16</sup> Elisabeth Elliot, *Marriage: A Revolution and Revelation. An unfinished, unedited, and previously unpublished draft.* Available at <http://www.elisabethelliott.org/Draft.pdf>.