

LEAVE, CLEAVE UNTO AND BE ONE

The threefold mystery of marriage

Bennie van der Walt

"Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife and they shall be one flesh..." (Genesis 2 verse 24)

Everything has its own mystery or secret. This is true from the simplest forms of vegetative life to man. And this is also true of human society such as, for example, the family, the business enterprise, the state, the church, marriage and many more.

On this special day in your lives, bride and bridegroom, you will naturally wish to know more about the mystery of marriage. Those who are still looking forward to it will also want to know it, and for those who have been married for years it would be good to hear it anew.

The Bible, God's Word to us, is the only Book which can reveal the deep secret of marriage to us. Many of the clever ideas expressed in magazine articles and books about the "ideal marriage" appear to me like so much straw in the wind of the Biblical wisdom.

The remarkable thing is that the Word of God gives away the secret right at the outset already - in its second chapter. And this is repeated throughout the Bible like a refrain. (Compare, for example, Matthew 19:5; 1 Corinthians 6:16 and Ephesians 5:3 1.) And yet we often read this verse without noticing the profound secret contained in it.

The inspired writer of the Bible sums up the secret in three simple words: Leave, cleave unto and be one. But before we are going to see what the three concepts together mean, let us look at what gave rise to the revelation of this secret.

1 The Prelude

God gave Adam a lovely paradise, a wonderful garden with streams, flowers, trees, birds and animals. Adam's happiness, however, is not perfect, because he has no one with whom to share his thoughts, feelings, desires, and his whole existence. He longs for something, even though he does not know what or whom. God in his wisdom first makes man realize the emptiness of his existence before he shows him what he really desires!

This leads to the first successful costeotomy in history - which does not mean that men have since had fewer ribs than women have! But from this it clearly emerges that man and woman have been made from the same "matter", are

both people, and should be together. God could also have made Eve out of the dust of the earth!

Subsequently there is the part that I find so beautiful, where God himself brings the woman to Adam. This, as we confess in the marriage formulary, He still does today with every man and woman. That you two have "found" each other is no coincidence.

When Adam woke from his "anaesthetic" there is something - no, somebody - next to him whom he has never seen before: somebody like him and yet different. Adam is surprised and entranced by this attractive being. Before this, he simply named the animals, but now, on viewing this enchanting creature, he becomes a creative artist, a poet (verse 23 is poetry in the original Hebrew).

From this first love song in history it emerges how pleased Adam was to have found someone like him (I assume that he was just as pleased about the differences!). From the name he gave her (wo-man he called her, because she was made out of man), one can see that he saw her in the first place as a human being, albeit different from him. Also his helper, but not in the sense of weaker servant - rather in the Biblical meaning of the word, viz., supporter (as God is also our Helper).

After this wonderfully romantic moment - the first meeting between man and woman in history - Adam becomes silent and the Bible leaves the rest to our imagination. The Biblical author, however, takes over, and reminds us that this miracle of marriage contains a secret, a mystery. Whoever does not know it - and does not obey it - will not know the joy of marriage, will not keep singing Adam's song of joy.

The prelude (verses 20-23) is beautiful, but the core, the nucleus, lies in the closing, in the threefold mystery (verse 24) to which we must now turn. (Seeing that in Old Testament times society was still patriarchally structured, the command to leave, cleave unto and be one is given to the man only, but this does not mean that it is not as fully applicable to the woman too.)

The first keyword is:

2 Leave

Why do mothers cry and brides and bridegrooms have radiant faces on their wedding day? It is precisely because mothers know that their children are now leaving the family home. And the bride and bridegroom beam because they are pleased - finally - to be leaving the parental home.

This is right and normal, because marriage is different from the family. Today a new, independent marriage came into being from two families. It is also done here in public, and (because you will now be regarded as legally married by the state), the leaving also has a legal character. Other claimants on either of you are hereby excluded!

In the spatial sense you are also leaving your parental homes by beginning your own home. Economically, too, you are going to provide for yourselves. Although I know from experience that a little financial help from the parents from time to time won't be unwelcome!

The most difficult aspect of this leaving must be the emotional. Parents tend still to advise their married children and even to prescribe to them - even without being asked. This creates unnecessary tension. Parents have to realize that their son or daughter, while still their child, has now primarily become the spouse of another.

For the married couple this leaving is easier and yet it still happens that the bride clings too tightly to her father's hand. Or that the young husband - even though he might not say it - might think that his mother could do many things better than his bride (such as cooking!). He has not let go of his mother's apron strings.

The leaving, however difficult it is, is an inherent part of marriage. If the parents do not accept it, they will render their children very unhappy. Therefore they have to be willing to commit themselves to it even though their son or daughter might not, in their eyes, have chosen the perfect spouse.

3 Cleave Unto

This "cleaving unto" each other has been noticed by your parents for long time - with them often worrying that it will go too far!

According to a book like the Song of Solomon, however, this is entirely normal.

Our sex-obsessed times will probably cause us to interpret this "cleaving unto" ("uniting" in the Good News Bible) as jumping into bed together. For many people today marriage simply means obtaining the exclusive right to sleep with somebody. Then marriage becomes no more than "legalized prostitution" or bestial copulation.

What is really meant by the old-fashioned term "cleaving unto"?

In the first place I think that it points to the warm and intimate bondedness to each other. It is a matter of two people having to live very closely to each other. (A double banana looks like two, but is in reality only one.)

There is more to it, though. In the Bible "cleave unto" also indicates that a dependent takes refuge in a stronger one (like Israel does unto God). The man and the woman are interdependent on each other.

With this the meaning of the simple little word has not been exhausted, however. In the original Hebrew this points especially at strong love or committed, unbreachable troth. And troth is essentially different from sex. It means reliability, genuineness, honesty, integrity, and fidelity.

If one is going to get married, it does not in the first place - as already said - mean that one now has legal rights to the other's body. Marriage means that troth is promised to each other in public.

And - however old-fashioned the Bible and the marriage formulary might sound - this is a promise for a lifetime. Only death can bring an end to it.

Of the three words, leave, cleave unto and being one, the middle is the most important, as it uncovers the deepest mystery of marriage. The leaving might be imperfect, and the unity, being one can fail, but if you do not cling to each other in troth, your marriage will inevitably be doomed.

It is wonderful to be in love with each other, and as you know it is not difficult, as it practically falls into your lap like a gift. However, to remain in love asks effort, it is a duty. At times the wife - for the sake of peace and love - must be willing to pick up her husband's clothes from the floor. At times the husband will have to have infinite patience with his wife because she is "crying for nothing" again - simply because he loves her.

4 Being One

In a certain sense the cleaving unto already implies being one. (If one cleaves unto the other, loves him/her, has troth and fidelity, two become one.) The cleaving unto has already made clear to us that marriage is a permanent union.

Yet a new element emerges here: the sexual. This is the playful, spontaneous, free, joyful and complete bodily surrender to somebody else and the equally joyful receiving of somebody else. The Old (Authorized) Translation refers to becoming one flesh.

The book Song of Solomon does not hesitate to describe this physical attraction of man and woman in the minutest detail. We should not spiritualize marriage - God Himself created man to have sexual urges and wants mankind to enjoy this.

However, in the Biblical secret for a happy marriage the cleaving unto (fidelity) does not come before the physical union without reason. The order is of crucial importance here. Reciprocal troth leads to physical union - and not the other way round. Sex does not create troth. The inverse is true: sex reveals, confirms, reinforces, and deepens the troth to each other. First reciprocal troth and fidelity and then it is sealed - the cherry on top - in becoming one flesh.

Sex and reciprocal troth may, therefore, according to God's commandment, never be separated. Sexual intercourse without troth is playing with satanic fire and can only bring seeming happiness, because it is nothing other than mutual exploitation and abuse.

The sexual union in marriage is very important. This is not the one and only union, however. (The "sex appeal", the physical attraction, will later begin to

disappear, and then the marriage still has to go on.) We have already seen that it is accompanied by troth. If there is not unity among man and wife in many more aspects, and if their unity does not grow, then the sexual bond will also lose its efficacy soon. Let me mention a few:

Financially and economically there has to be unity. What was mine is now yours too. And what was yours is now mine too. Everything has to be shared - poverty and wealth!

There has to be emotional unity. Joys and sorrows have to be shared. Be serious about each other, accept each other, open up to each other, and try to understand each other.

As with being true, so with being one: it is not only a gift but also a duty; not only a present, but also a command. Tensions will arise in your marriage, but be consoled: it is only a dead or dying marriage that does not have conflicts!

The most important facet of this unity, dear bridal couple, I have kept to the last: unity in faith in God. It is this deepest unity in faith that will carry your marriage through every possible crisis. Even when marital troth begins to fade, it is the strength of God's grace in Christ which can carry you through. You might therefore neglect many things, but the mutual growth in faith has to be your highest priority. Interaction with God in prayer and Scripture reading will give your marriage the dimension of the deepest and most indissoluble unity.

5. A Threefold Mystery

This then is the threefold secret of a happy marriage: leaving, cleaving unto and being one. Without the leaving it is not possible to cleave unto each other. (Because then you remain bonded to your parental home.) And without the cleaving unto (reciprocal troth) the being one flesh (sexual union) is empty and dangerous. These three together form the one great secret. We find the heart in the central one of the three: reciprocal, lifelong troth.

Dear bride and bridegroom, what a privilege that you do not have to enter marriage not knowing - like so many other couples today - the mystery of this way of sharing your lives. By opening up the secret, the mystery, to you, God Himself today gave you the greatest wedding present that any couple could ever hope to receive!

May you never, never, forget or neglect it. Because if you should live according to this secret, God Himself will bless you together and your cup of happiness will always run over.

AMEN