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CHAPTER II
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR MARRIAGE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF SUCCESSFUL MARITAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Introduction

At the foundation of the world, God, because of His divine wisdom and eternal love, gave man two institutions. One was a day of rest, known as the Sabbath (Reyburn & Fry, 1998), and the other was the institution of marriage. It was to be a joining together of a man and a woman for the divine purpose of salvation, procreation, enjoyment, and companionship. From the first marital ceremony to now, the institution of marriage has been the most basic building block of society, providing the foundational support of the family. It was within the joys, shared purposes, challenges, and camaraderie of marriage that man and woman were to find harmony, completion, and peace. God’s intent in the unification of man and woman was to create within humanity a relationship that closely mirrored the image of God Himself. The interconnectedness of the Trinity, existing as three distinct individuals, as one, is the relational foundation for why God joined man and woman together to live, likewise as one. (Richards & Richards, 1987; Hughes & Laney, 2001)

When the concept of oneness as the image of God is explained and understood, one would be able to more fully grasp the reason why conflict and dissatisfaction in marriage is so detrimental. This will also provide a theological understanding for why it appears the devil attacks the harmony of marriage with such ferocity. The presence of unresolved conflict creates an environment that is a direct antithesis to the closeness God wanted to mirror in the human family. As a result of our fallen nature, the perfect harmony that was to exist in the first family has been replaced with selfish, reactive and negative behavioral habits that lead in many cases to
divorce. Pastoral observation suggests couples face an uphill battle with managing conflict, which in turn disrupts the connectedness of the family and damages their likeness to God.

This theological reflection will be divided into four sections. The first will address the law of first mention as it relates to marriage in the Bible, and will outline the intent of God to replicate His image in the union of the first family. The second section will outline the various purposes of marriage found in the creation account, which includes salvation, companionship, completeness, procreation, and interdependence. The third section will take a look at some of the Old Testament views of conflict, and marital discord. It will give a limited view, by drawing on Old Testament examples, of the impact conflict can have. The fourth section will discuss conflict and marital enrichment principles from the New Testament to include statements of Jesus in the Gospels, as well as the Pauline epistles.

**The Image of God**

In Genesis 1: 25 at the culmination of the fifth day of creation, God took introspection on all of his work up until that point, and the Bible records, "God made all sorts of wild animals, livestock, and small animals, each able to produce offspring of the same kind. And God saw that it was good." However, in Genesis 1:31, God, after making man, makes this statement on the culmination of the sixth day, and the conclusion of the creative week, "Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good!" (NLT)

Many have tackled the question by asking what made this day “very good,” as opposed to every other creation day where the Creator declared that his work was “good.” The nuance deserves attention, one author suggests in attempting to answer this question, it could be that God looked at his new earth now teeming with birds to fill the air, and fish to fill the sea, and
beasts to roam the earth, and finally knowing that the space he created was full of living things, that he stepped back and marveled at his creative work (Matthews, 1996). Another view as to what made this day very good would be that God saw the creation of man as the crowning jewel of his creation. That God’s intent was for everything to be made for man, so once man inhabited the space God created for him, God took introspection and declared it very good. (Smith, 1993)

Richards (1991) suggests that there is no doubt in the Bible that the creation of man was not a special event apart from the rest of the creation narrative. But it did have special meaning. By choosing to physically form man out of the dust of the ground, and then personally breathing into his nostrils the breath of life, provides proof that man was made with special attention. However, that which separated man from the animals is not just the carefulness with which man was made. It was the implanted image of God, the blueprint from which man was created, that was unique to man and woman, that God declared “very good”.

When God decided in his wisdom and creative genius to make man, the Biblical account tells us in Genesis 1:26-28:

26 Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” 27 So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. 28 Then God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

What is seen in this text is that man was created in the image of God, to be as the text states, “Like us.” Human life was created in the image of God (v. 27). This image was imparted only to humans, not animals, as can be seen in Genesis 2:7. What this “image of God” means, has been debated in theological circles. According to Walvoord & Zuck (1989), the word “Image”
(ṣelem) is used figuratively in the text. He suggests it is not physically possible for man to be made in a human likeness because God does not have a human form. He states in his commentary that being in God’s image means that humans share, though imperfectly and finitely, in God’s nature alone. This nature he contends includes only His communicable attributes such as life, personality, truth, wisdom, love, holiness, and justice, which gives man the capacity for spiritual fellowship with God.

Hughes et al. (2001) in contrast to Walwoord & Zuck disagrees, and contends in the Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary, that the image and likeness of God as seen in Genesis 1:26–27 is most immediately linked to humanity’s power to rule over creation, and to reflect the nature and graces of the male and female gender. According to Hughes and others (2001), humans’ rule over the earth reflects God’s perfect and sovereign rule over the universe. Furthermore, human gender reflects God’s infinitely deep character as the potent Creator and the perfectly wise, loving, and nurturing Person. In another commentary on the book of Genesis, the authors concludes, that the image of God cannot be found in the “erect form or features of man, or in his ability to think or reason”. They make this assertion by highlighting the fact that the devil and his angels are, in this respect to intellect and reason, far superior to man, yet inferior to God. So the likeness of man in God’s image does not refer to the physical form or intellectual structure of man. (Jamieson, Fausset, & Brown, 1871)

However, unlike the previous authors discussed, Hines et al. (2001) pays close attention to the interpersonal aspect of the statement of God and suggests that Genesis 1:26-28 is actually the foundational relational statement of the Bible. Within the institution of marriage, one can see a reflection of God’s image only in unification. The idea of two individuals, specifically male and female becoming one is uniquely similar to the three members of the Godhead, which exist
as one entity. God as a singular person, using plural nomenclature, states “let us make man in
our, image”. The triune God displays a nature which is communal. Creating humankind in the
image of God would therefore indicate that our interaction as male and female in the communal
relationship of marriage is to reflect this aspect of the nature of God. According to one of the
fundamental beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, God exists as God the Father, God
the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. God is one entity with three functional representations. It can
therefore be argued that the communal aspect of God’s character is the image of God most
closely aligned with the context of the text.

If one were to agree with Hines and others (2001), it would suggest that one believes that
God, in order to reproduce His image in man, made two individuals. Before the existence of
Eve, the first woman, the image of God in mankind, was not yet achieved. That image was not
reproduced until man became linked with his female counterpart and community began. Just as
God is three entities bound as one, man and woman were to be bound together as one. The two
were to join together to form one synchronized unit. This oneness of two becoming one was
created to mirror God’s three in one. God created the first family to be two beings living
harmoniously as one. God, as the divine family, created the human family in their image.

The concept of God creating man and woman to be joined together, homogeneous in
their nature, as married people reflects Christianity’s view of the Triune God. The Trinity,
complementary of each other, participates in all the supernatural attributes of divinity. The
Godhead can only be fully defined by the interrelationships of the three, co-eternally, working
together. The significance of this is that God at His core is relational, as exemplified by living
in an eternal loving relationship among the Father, Son and Spirit. Therefore, humanity made in
God’s image must also be relational. The two becoming one flesh in marriage provides us with a two dimensional picture of our three dimensional God (Sunshine, 2013).

In summary, God created male and female as a unit, and together as husband and wife they were to reflect His image. By himself Adam could not fully do it, and neither could Eve as an individual because there was something missing. However, even as God declared each day of creation as good, there was one aspect of the created world that God stopped his creative work and declared not to just be good, but very good!

**Biblical Purposes for Marriage**

It was as the dust settled on the sixth day of creation that the Triune God devised a plan for man to be created in His image. The remainder of the creation account provides additional purposes for the institution of marriage. There are four additional, biblical purposes for marriage which can be found in the first few chapters of the book of Genesis. Those include 1. Procreation, 2. Salvation, 3. Companionship, and 4. Completion.

*Marriage as a Means of Procreation*

God gives instructions to man and woman in Genesis 1:28, as he commands your human couple “to be fruitful and multiply.” This was an expressed command by God, which highlights an additional divine intent for marriage, procreation. The ability to sexually reproduce is a gift from God, and the text makes it clear that God intended Adam and Eve to have children and populate the earth. Sexual expression within the framework of marriage can be a joyful affirmation of a couple’s intimacy, and all of the pleasures derived from it, is a blessing from
It was God who designed human sexuality and, looking at “all He had made,” pronounced it “very good” (Gen, 2:31) (Richards & Richards, 1987)

Marriage as a Means of Salvation

The context for the Biblical foundation of marriage as a means of salvation is provided in Genesis 2:15-16 which states, “The Lord God placed man in the garden of Eden to tend it and watch over it.” He then issues a command at the end of verse 16, “you may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden – except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat this fruit, you are sure to die.” This command was to provide Adam with a test of his obedience and allegiance to God. Adam’s ability to choose to enjoy all the splendor that God had made, and yet be obedient to God, to stay away from the one place that was to be off-limits, was Adam’s only requirement to enjoy God’s new paradise for the remainder of his life. To go contrary to that command meant death, spiritually, which would eventually involve physical death. (Utley, 2001)

God in his wisdom, and understanding the ramifications of this command says in Genesis 2:18, “And the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him’.”

What God says in response to the imperative to not touch the tree of knowledge of good and evil is to say that man being alone was not a good thing. God’s creative process, in recognizing man’s inability to be alone, appeared to have had a flaw. God knew, if left to his own devices, man would find it difficult to resist the temptation to disobey. By contending that everything in creation was “very good” except the loneliness of Adam, a third understanding for
Biblical marriage comes to light. Marriage was given to man as a means of salvation (Keil & Delitzsch, 1996).

_Marriage as a Means of Companionship and Completion_

The third Biblical purpose of marriage is to provide companionship as presented in the creation account. In the same verse, Genesis 2:18, God refers to Eve as a “helper.” Helper (‘ezer) in the text means “support.” The root word (‘azer) is the same one which is used in Psalm 121:1, “From whence does my help come? My help comes from the Lord.” The “helper” Eve as is presented in both texts, is literally someone who comes alongside Adam to help him do what God felt he was ill equipped to do on his own. (Carson, France, & Moyter, 1994)

The Bible goes on to say that this helper would be “comparable” to him. It may be a better translation of the word “comparable” to say that Eve was “suitable for him or, adequate for him,” or perhaps even “like him.” (Reyburn & Fry, 1998).

All that Adam’s nature demanded for its full completion, physically, intellectually, and socially, was to be included in this alter ego who was soon to stand by his side, to help him do what was impossible for him to accomplish on his own. Therefore, it can be concluded that man’s need, and woman’s power to satisfy that need is integral to the marital relationship (Spence-Jones, 1909). In this context the word “helper” seems to express the idea of an “indispensable companion,” as the NET Bible Commentary suggests. The woman would complement the man, and it would be logically sound to infer that the man would also complement the woman, in that they would supply what the other was lacking.

Hence, this was another purpose for marriage as she was to complete him, not physically, or emotionally, but spiritually. Parrot & Parrot (2005) contends that wholeness is
found in an interdependent relationship, in which two people with self-respect and dignity make a commitment to nurture their own spiritual growth, as well as their partner’s.

This idea is supported in the subsequent verses which state:

21 And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. 22 Then the rib which the LORD God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man. 23 And Adam said: “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man.” 24 Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. 25 And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.

When two people are brought together in marriage and display oneness, God’s image is reflected and He is glorified. This oneness is achieved according to the text when a man “leaves his father and mother” or establishes his independence, and is joined to his wife. This joining is instantaneous through the physical consummation of the relationship, as well as progressive, or developing over time, as they grow together.

According to Henry (1706) before sinning, Adam and Eve were not ashamed of their bodies. Their awareness of self was without guilt and shame. There were only two limitations on their relationship: physical (the universe in which they lived) and moral (the forbidden tree). For Adam and Eve at this time there was no fear of exploitation, no sense of vulnerability, no need to defend themselves from one another as they were completely united in a loving and trusting relationship. They were truly interdependent.

This was supported in Knowles (2001) assertion, which states:

“The man and the woman belong together and complete each other. They’re different, but they match. Their bodies fit. Heart to heart, they correspond. They are at ease with each other. They aren’t embarrassed or self-conscious about their bodies. They are comfortable in their one-anotherness. (pg. 24)

However, after the entrance of sin into world, they became keenly aware of their nakedness, and began to display feelings of vulnerability, shame, exploitation, and exposure, to
the point that they needed to hide themselves from God. This shame, and the entrance of sin, is what gave rise to conflict in the human family.

Conflicts as a Disruption of the Image of God

One of the reasons the devil is so intent upon destroying the harmony of marriage, is that every time he sees that oneness in two people, he sees a reflection of God’s nature. He sees the unity, oneness, and harmony, reflected in the Trinity. The author Ellen White (1956) in Adventist Home states “it was Satan’s studied effort [in the antediluvian age] to pervert the marriage institution, to weaken its obligations and lessen its sacredness; for in no surer way could he deface the image of God in man and open the door to misery and vice.” (pg. 326). The following are examples of conflict and marital discord as recorded in the Old Testament.

Old Testament Examples of Conflict and Marital Discord

A Case Study on Adam and Eve

Scripture is replete with textual references that deal with the need to maintain unity in human relationships (1 Peter 3:7, Amos 3:3, Ecc. 4:9-12). In the Bible the casual observer will see clearly the detriment that conflict has on the family, specifically in the marital relationship. The first recorded example occurs after both Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit God had instructed them not to eat (Genesis 3:6). This was the beginning of marital conflict and disunity.

The Bible records a poignant conversation between God, Adam and Eve after they ate the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Genesis 3:8-13 states,

“8 When the cool evening breezes were blowing, the man and his wife heard the Lord God walking about in the garden. So they hid from the Lord God among the trees.
9 Then the Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?” 10 He replied, “I heard you walking in the garden, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked.” 11 “Who told you that you were naked?” the Lord God asked. “Have you eaten from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat?” 12 The man replied, “It was the woman you gave me who gave me the fruit, and I ate it.” 13 Then the Lord God asked the woman, “What have you done?” “The serpent deceived me,” she replied. “That’s why I ate it.”

In this first example, a clear defensive conflict management style is displayed, where neither Adam nor Eve is willing to take responsibility for his or her actions. Strassner (2009) highlights the contemporary familiarity with our first parents’ response. First, Adam points the finger at God: “It was the woman you gave me,” and at the same time, he also shifts the blame onto his wife: “The woman you gave me, gave me the fruit, and I ate it.” In other words, Adam declares, “she made me do it.” Conversely, when God looks to Eve for an explanation, she in turn points to the serpent. “The serpent deceived me,” which is the contemporary version of “the devil made me do it”!

Strassner (2009) continues that, blame-shifting is a universal human disease. Ever since Adam and Eve, it has been part of our sinful human nature: He gives the following examples,

“I know I sometimes lose my temper. But that is just the way God made me.” “I know I shouldn’t talk to my wife that way, but I’m under a lot of stress at work.” “I know I shouldn’t read these racy romance novels, but my husband isn’t exactly a knight in shining armor anymore.” But anytime we begin a sentence with “I know I shouldn’t … but,” we are on dangerous ground. We ought simply to stop with: “I know I shouldn’t” (p. 35-36).

Case Study of David and Michal

Another Old Testament example of the dangers of marital discord can be found in the conflict between David and Michal as he danced before the ark of the covenant. The Bible records in 2 Samuel 6: 13-16; 20-23 (NKJV)

13 And so it was, when those bearing the ark of the LORD had gone six paces, that he sacrificed oxen and fatted sheep. 14 Then David danced before the LORD with all his might; and
David was wearing a linen ephod.  

15 So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting and with the sound of the trumpet.  

16 Now as the ark of the LORD came into the City of David, Michal, Saul’s daughter, looked through a window and saw King David leaping and whirling before the LORD; and she despised him in her heart.  

20 Then David returned to bless his household. And Michal the daughter of Saul came out to meet David, and said, “How glorious was the king of Israel today, uncovering himself today in the eyes of the maids of his servants, as one of the base fellows shamelessly uncovers himself!”  

21 So David said to Michal, “It was before the LORD, who chose me instead of your father and all his house, to appoint me ruler over the people of the LORD, over Israel. Therefore I will play music before the LORD.  

22 And I will be even more undignified than this, and will be humble in my own sight. But as for the maidservants of whom you have spoken, by them I will be held in honor.”  

23 Therefore Michal the daughter of Saul had no children to the day of her death.

As the procession leading the ark, enters Jerusalem, Michal observed the religious fervor of her husband from a window in the royal residence. In her heart, the text says, she despised David (6:16). Why Michal found David’s actions so disgusting is not stated, however, a casual observer may conclude that perhaps she was jealous of the other women who witnessed her husband in this way. Whatever the reason for the discontent, we see David returning to his home in a joyous mood, to actually “bless” his household, and instead is greeted by a sullen, and cynical wife. She verbally chastises her husband for acting disgracefully, by uncovering himself in the eyes some of the other women of Israel. (2 Sam. 6:20).

David, once accused, defended himself and inadvertently contributed to the marital conflict by saying that he had been celebrating before God. In his celebration he was happy to belittle himself before God and honor the Lord before the people. He then poured fuel on the fire by reminding Saul’s daughter that the God he was celebrating, demoted her family, and chose him instead. He went even further to let her know that even though she did not approve of his actions, he might in the future, be even more inclined to diminish himself before the Lord, therefore letting his wife know, in no uncertain terms, that she may not like what he does, but the other women would.
The periscope concludes with a chilling statement. It reveals that Michal had no child to the day of her death (vs. 23). According to Smith (2005), the placement of the verse at this point suggests that Michal’s barrenness may have been a punishment for the attitude, which she had toward the religious zeal of her husband. Or the verse could point to the permanent estrangement between David and Michal. While there is no definitive answer given in scripture as to which theory is correct, this story is the last recorded reference to Michal in the Bible. As a matter of context, five chapters later, the Biblical reader joins David on his rooftop as he watches Bathsheba bathing (2 Sam. 11:1-3).

Case Study of Samson and his Bride from Timnah

Another OT Biblical account of marital discord and the danger that a potential breakdown in trust can have on a marital relationship can be found in the record of Samson’s marriage to his bride from Timnah. The act of betrayal recorded in Judges 14: 16-17 between Samson and his wife, led to his jealous rage and murder.

16 Then Samson’s wife wept on him, and said, “You only hate me! You do not love me! You have posed a riddle to the sons of my people, but you have not explained it to me.” And he said to her, “Look, I have not explained it to my father or my mother; so should I explain it to you?” 17 Now she had wept on him the seven days while their feast lasted. And it happened on the seventh day that he told her, because she pressed him so much. Then she explained the riddle to the sons of her people.

Samson after trusting his wife with the answer to his riddle, and subsequently discovering that she had broken that trust acts in such a way that demonstrates the hurt he feels. It is important to note that Samson’s wife manipulated or coerced her husband into revealing his secret. Samson had decisively refused to tell her; but on the seventh day, he conceded. It is possible that since marriages at this time were typically consummated on the seventh day, she used the
promise of sex to lure him in to revealing his secret. Whatever her reasons, the result of her betrayal is outlined in Judges 15: 1-3:

1 After a while, in the time of wheat harvest, it happened that Samson visited his wife with a young goat. And he said, “Let me go in to my wife, into her room.” But her father would not permit him to go in. 2 Her father said, “I really thought that you thoroughly hated her; therefore I gave her to your companion. Is not her younger sister better than she? Please, take her instead.” 3 And Samson said to them, “This time I shall be blameless regarding the Philistines if I harm them!”

Samson, having been hurt, goes on a killing spree to overcompensate for the pain he is feeling by not being allowed to see his wife, and being offered his wife’s younger sister as compensation for his true wife.

There are a myriad of other examples from characters in the Old Testament and the negative effects of marital conflict. In yet another example we see Abraham and his family, and how his choice to follow the bad advice of his wife in taking her handmaiden Hagar (Gen. 16: 1-4), changed the course of human history. Then there is the story of Hosea and Gomer (Hosea 1-3), which outlines the negative impact of marital infidelity. While those examples won’t be unpacked in this theological reflection, the Bible is crystal clear that Godly marriage is meant to be characterized by unity and oneness.

The Importance of Two Being One

The Bible says in Amos 3:3, “Can two walk together except they be agreed?” According to Hines (2001), that is an important question to have answered in marriage. The idea that a couple has to be singular in focus and agree on the direction of the family unit, is paramount to keeping the peace in the home. At the heart, Hines contends that conflict, or disagreement, is simply a failure to agree. Hines (2001), suggests that agreement is one way a
husband and a wife become one flesh. According to Carson and others (1994), “Walk together” expresses habitual companionship such as can only arise from the Lord and Israel being ‘in agreement’. They are together in covenant, but can their fellowship continue if they are at odds?

No! Why? Because the law of cause and effect would operate to separate them. This explanation can be made for the marriage covenant, which was supposed to be a representation of God’s covenant with Israel.

In Ecclesiastes 4: 9-12 we have an additional picture of togetherness in human relationships. It states:

“9 Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: 10 If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. 11 Also, if we lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? 12 Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.”

According to Henry (1994) Solomon is lamenting in the text about being alone. He suggests that when one is alone he is susceptible to many temptations which good company and friendship would prevent and help him guard against. There are three word pictures provided in the text that describe the benefit of being with someone else. First Solomon outlines the benefit that is provided when and where two travel together, and if one falls, the availability of the other to help him get up. Henry (1994) further suggests that this can also apply to sin and the ability of someone’s travelling companion to restore them through accountability. The second word picture is that of providing warmth, and the ability of two people through the exchange of body heat, and external resources to share what they have can help stave off the chill of the cold night. The final word picture has to deal with the ability of two people to thwart the advances of an enemy, by being joined as a 3-stranded cord, which is widely accepted as God’s presence in the relationship.
It is interesting to note that in the text Solomon started with the number *one* (v. 8), then moved to two (v. 9), and then closed with three (v. 12). According to Weirsbe (1996), this is typical of Hebrew literature. One cord could be broken easily; two cords would require more strength; but three cords woven together could not be easily broken. If two travelers are better than one, then three would fare even better (Weirsbe, 1996). If the companionship of two is profitable, how much more is this the case when one more combines? The cord of three strands was the strongest made so the number *three* is used as the symbol of completeness and perfection (Spence-Jones, 1909).

Henry (1994) states that

“for where two are closely joined in holy love and fellowship, Christ will by his Spirit come to them, and make the third, as he joined himself to the two disciples going to Emmaus. This leads directly into a threefold cord that can never be broken, as they that dwell in love, dwell in God, and God in them” (p. 1038).

*Admonitions on Conflict from the Wisdom Literature*

Some of the most interesting declarations on conflict and conflict resolution can be found in the book of Proverbs. It is no surprise that King Solomon had a plethora of information to share on the nature of conflict especially in marriage, considering he was rumoured to have more than 700 wives and 300 concubines. According to Carson and others (1994) dissension and disagreement is a recurrent theme of Proverbs. In the book of Proverbs it seems that the best-presented solution is either to withdraw from the quarrel as is seen in Proverbs 17:14 or let the matter be decided by the equivalent of the toss of a coin as is depicted in Proverbs 18:18. Solomon states in Proverbs 17:14, “starting a quarrel is like opening a floodgate, so stop before a dispute breaks out.”

The NET Commentary (2006) states, “The image involves a small leak in a container or cistern that starts to spurt out water. The problem will get worse if it is not stopped. Strife is like
that.” What the NET Commentary is suggesting is that without working through the issues which can cause conflict, problems can be confounded and eventually made worse. Specifically, a stubborn continuation of a dispute does more damage than making a minor wrong decision. In fact, Wilmington (1997) states that it takes very little effort to start an argument but much effort to prevent or stop one.

In dealing with the negative impact of conflict on the emotional level, the author of the book of Proverbs gives a startling rebuke as he describes Proverbs 21:9 in which he states: “It is better to live alone in the corner of an attic than with a quarrelsome woman in a lovely home.” Henry (1994) in his commentary makes a powerful statement in reference to the idea promoted in this text. He states,

“What a great affliction it is to a man to have a brawling scolding woman for his wife, who upon every occasion, and often upon no occasion, breaks out into a passion, and chides either him or those about her, is fretful to herself and furious to her children and servants, and, in both, vexatious to her husband” (p. 1001).

Henry (1994) goes on to say that when one is presented with such a situation one has no choice to get away. He states,

“what many a man is forced to do under such an affliction. He cannot keep up his authority. He finds it to no purpose to contradict the most unreasonable passion, for it is unruly and rages so much the more; and his wisdom and grace will not suffer him to render railing for railing, nor his conjugal affection to use any severity, and therefore he finds it his best way to retire into a corner of the house-top, and sit alone there, out of the hearing of her clamor; and if he employ himself well there, as he may do, it is the wisest course he can take. Better do so than quit the house, and go into bad company, for diversion, as many, who, like Adam, make their wife’s sin the excuse of their own” (p. 1002).

That sentiment is supported by Walvoord & Zuck (1989), as they make mention that a wife who causes strife makes a home unpleasant and undesirable.

However, while the aforementioned texts singles out the women in the home, the man is not exonerated from his responsibility in the wisdom literature for maintaining peace in his home. Proverbs 18: 1-2 (NIV) underscores the criticality of being wise in the midst of
arguments, and seeking to understand one another. It states, “An unfriendly person pursues selfish ends and against all sound judgment starts quarrels. Fools find no pleasure in understanding but delight in airing their own opinions.” This sentiment is echoed later in Proverbs 26: 21 (NIV) where it states “As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome person for kindling strife.”

The wisdom literature also has good advice for its reader on how to deal most effectively with marital discord and conflict. Arguably one of the most famous passages for learning how to deal with arguments that arise in marriage is found in Proverbs 15:1, “a soft answer turn away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” In this text we see the principle or law of first response. According to the text, the key to successful communication in marriage is not the person who initiates an argument, but the person who responds that makes the difference. Setting the tone for the argument with a “soft” answer can make a positive impact. The Hebrew word for “soft” in the text is “rak” which means tender, or delicate. This is more than a mild response; it is conciliatory, an answer that restores good temper and reasonableness. (Net Bible Commentary, 2006)

This statement highlights the fact that many conflicted couples and individuals miss, that words have power. According to Wilmington (1997), words can either heal or hurt (Prov.12:18; Prov. 16:24). They can “bring life and health” (Prov. 15:4), “lead to life” (Prov. 10:11), or be “as lovely as golden apples” (Prov. 25:11). Conversely, used wrongly, words can crush the spirit (Prov. 15:4), “pierce like a sword” (Prov. 12:18, NIV), and bring death (Prov. 18:21).

In the preceding sections, we have explored the OT examples of marital conflict and discord and how words can be used either as a fuel or balm to ignite or soothe a conflict. In the
following section, we will examine the conflict resolution principles as outlined in the New Testament.

**New Testament Conflict Resolution Principles**

*Conflict as a Hindrance to Prayer*

The New Testament is replete with admonitions and texts regarding marriage and the resolution of conflict. The text which is foundational to the understanding that the Image of God is interrupted when couples cannot be in agreement is found in 1 Peter 3:7 which states, “In the same way, you husbands must give honor to your wives. Treat your wife with understanding as you live together. She may be weaker than you are, but she is your equal partner in God’s gift of new life. Treat her as you should so your prayers will not be hindered.”

The latter portion of the text gives the spiritual basis for the need to experience oneness and harmony in marriage. Hines (2001) contends that Peter admonishes husbands in the text to dwell with their wives in understanding, giving honor to them, and seeing themselves as being connected to their wives as children of the promises of God. Hines (2001) goes on to suggest that God will not hear the prayer of a husband that involves a request for something for him alone, but will only hear prayers that benefit both parties in the marriage.

In dealing with the question as to the woman as a “weaker” partner, Hughes & Laney (2001) concludes that the term “weaker” has a meaning that can range from physical, spiritual, or emotional weakness. Although this is debated by the assertions of Arichea & Nida (1980), which suggest to understand the word “weaker” one must recognize that it is referring to women and gives the idea that women are simply vessels or tools in the hands of men. Which is an idea contrary to the spirit of the context.
Rienow and Rienow (2010) contend that when God created a wife for Adam, He did not create a second-class citizen. He created a co-worker. He created the wife with equal value, equal worth, and equal dignity to help with the mission of her husband. The purpose of equality before God is so that honor, and mutual respect is shared between the couple. Hughes & Laney (2001) suggests that husbands who fail to understand and honor their wives will have hindered prayer lives.

What it means to have hindered prayers is explained in 1 Peter 3:12, where the Bible states, The eyes of the Lord watch over those who do right, and his ears are open to their prayers. But the Lord turns his face against those who do evil.” A righteous husband in relationship with his wife, according to the text, has the full attention of God in his prayers. God is against those who do evil, those who operate out of spite, and those who are contrary to the principles of Christian love. Their prayers will not be heard. A conclusion can be drawn from these statements that the marital relationship, which was set up by God to be a means of salvation is hindered by conflict. After all 1 Peter 3:12 advises, “above all, love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins.”

The Danger of Unresolved Conflict

The Apostle Paul warned in his discussion to the church at Ephesus the danger of letting conflict fester in a relationship. He states in Ephesians 4: 26-27, “And “don’t sin by letting anger control you.” Don’t let the sun go down while you are still angry, for anger gives a foothold to the devil.” Bratcher & Nida (1993) in writing about this text states that the main point the writer makes is that anger should not be nourished: “do not let the sun go down while you are angry”. Sunset then, as it does now, marked the end of one day and the beginning of
another day, so a Christian should not continue to be angry with his fellow believer from one day to the next, but should seek reconciliation at once.

When couples allow their anger to become sin or allow themselves to keep their anger for more than a day, it gives the devil an opportunity to gain control over their attitudes, actions, reactions and relationships. It gives Satan a foothold to lead conflicted parties into greater anger and even more sin. According to Anders (1999), the words “place” or “room”, is talking about the opportunity and scope for acting in and through you the spouse or individual. There seems to be no special reference to the last exhortation, but as that demands a special act of vigilance and self-control, so the activity of the devil demands vigilance and self-control on all occasions, and especially on those on which the devil is most apt to try to get a foothold.

Spence-Jones (1909) states, “the reference to the devil is not a figure, but an obvious recognition of his personality, and of the liability of all Christians to fall under his influence.” It is possible to be angry and not sin, but if we do sin, according to Wiersbe, we must settle the matter that has caused the strife quickly and not let the sun go down on our wrath. As Matthew 5:25 states, “Agree with thine adversary quickly,” or as Matthew 18:15 states, “Go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone.”

Hines (2001) contends that the fire of anger, if not quenched by loving forgiveness, will spread and defile and destroy the work of God. According to Jesus, anger is the first step toward murder (Matt. 5:21–26), because anger gives the devil a foothold in our lives, and Satan is a murderer (John 8:44). Satan hates God and God’s people, and when he finds a believer with the sparks of anger in his heart, he fans those sparks, adds fuel to the fire, which does a great deal of damage to God’s people and the marriage relationship.
Now, this does not mean that it is a sin to be angry. Sometimes anger is warranted, and Christians do get angry. In fact, Jesus himself got angry (see John 2: 14-16). Anders (1999) suggests that in those times when people get angry that they must be careful how they act, for anger if left unchecked can lead to sin. To sin in anger would include doing and saying unkind things, or acting in harmful ways to others. So to reiterate this important point, when anger is allowed to fester it gives the devil an opportunity to gain control over our actions, and eventually all of our relationships.

The Importance of Love and Respect/Submission

Paul extends his admonitions to married couples in perhaps one of the most widely used texts on marriage, Ephesians 5: 21-33 which reads,

“21 And further, submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. 22 For wives, this means submit to your husbands as to the Lord. 23 For a husband is the head of his wife as Christ is the head of the church. He is the Savior of his body, the church. 24 As the church submits to Christ, so you wives should submit to your husbands in everything. 25 For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her 26 to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God’s word.* 27 He did this to present her to himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. Instead, she will be holy and without fault. 28 In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as they love their own bodies. For a man who loves his wife actually shows love for himself. 29 No one hates his own body but feeds and cares for it, just as Christ cares for the church. 30 And we are members of his body. 31 As the Scriptures say, “A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.”* 32 This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one. 33 So again I say, each man must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.” (NLT)

Anders (1999) contends that the text lays the foundation for the complementary roles, which are important to be understood in marriage. According to the text, the wife is to be subject to her husband as he is subject to the Lord. This does not mean that she submits to her husband in the same way and to the same degree as she does the Lord, since the possibility exists that her
husband might ask her to disobey God. Rather she serves the Lord by having a submissive heart toward her husband and by obeying him as long as it does not require her to disobey the Lord. Anders suggests later on in his commentary on this text that the reason the wife is called upon to be subject to her husband is that the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the church. As the church is to be subject to Christ, so the wife is to be subject to her husband.

This subjection that the woman is admonished to have toward her husband does not mean inferiority. It is clear that male and female are both created in the image of God and that in Christ, where personal worth is concerned, as is stated in Galatians 3:28, there is “neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” However, God has placed all of us in differing positions of authority and submission. The man was appointed to be the head of the family unit, to lead his family in a spiritual manner. This is a position of responsibility, not authority. It was the man’s responsibility to lead his household, not have ownership or subjugate his wife. Author Ellen White (1980) states in the book, Patriarchs and Prophets, that a set of circumstances exists, which the powers of evil work to keep spouses from achieving, that is, treating each other as equals. "Eve was created from a rib from the side of Adam, signifying that she was not to control him as the head, not to be trampled under his feet as an inferior, but to stand by his side as an equal, to be loved and protected by him.” (pg. 46)

After instructing wives to be subject to their husbands, Paul instructs husbands to love their wives so completely and so righteously that the wife need never fear or suffer from her life of submission (Eph. 5: 26-27). Husbands are to love their wives just as Christ loved the church, to the point of death, and indicative of His ultimate self-sacrifice. The love that a man is to show to his wife is to mirror Jesus’ dedication of his life, to the establishment and welfare of the church. The extent that Jesus was willing to go to prove his love can be seen in the fact that he
emptied himself of glory and riches (Phil. 2:7), subjected himself to the ridicule of his creation (Luke 23:11), suffered (1 Peter 2:21), and was eventually crucified for crimes he did not commit (1 Peter 3:18). Within that example, a husband is to find the length to which he is to go to love his wife as Christ loves His church. He is to give himself up for her, putting her needs and well-being first. He is to dedicate his life to the physical, emotional, and spiritual welfare of his wife. Following the example of Christ, he is to embrace and accept responsibility even when not at fault, because the example Jesus gave was of one accused and sentenced for crimes he did not commit. When a husband loves his wife so completely, the wife would need never fear submission (Eggerich, 2004).

What is most important to understand is what Richards (1991) suggests in that each partner in a marriage has a privilege. The husband’s privilege is to put his wife first, as Christ put us first when He died for us. The wife’s privilege is to set the tone of submission by being responsive and caring. Neither is “over” the other; each ministers to the other in his or her own special way.

**Conflict Management As A Means of Being Christ-like**

Marriage provides a character building experience that at its root provides a couple with firsthand knowledge of what it means to be like Christ. Ephesians 5: 1-2 “Be imitators of God, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” (ESV)

We can see in Ephesians that the reason for men to love despite the pain and anguish of conflict is because he is to love like Christ loves. Marriage is intended to be a character building
exercise where one develops the character and endurance to stay committed despite the trials and challenges of marriage (Romans 5:3-5).

The image of God through His son Jesus Christ was laid out as an example before couples as something to strive and attain as well. That is what can be seen in Paul’s letter to the Colossians, Colossians 3:13-15, it states:

“13 Make allowance for each other’s faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. 14 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace. And always be thankful.”

According to Melick (1991), the text when it says in the KJV, “whatever grievances you may have against one another,” it is obviously speaking to the offended party, not the offending one. It is even suggesting that the offended should take initiative in enduring and forgiving, rather than waiting for the offender to apologize. By enduring and forgiving, the conscience is cleansed and the matter forgotten. The burden is lifted, and the offended can think and act like Christ even toward the offender. This can be a reflection of Christ on the cross forgiving without confession those who were crucifying him.

Paul goes on to advise that harboring resentment and ill will toward another does little good, and to do so is outside the spirit of Christian love. Anyone can hold grudges, but the mark of Christians is that they do not. They forgive regardless. The pattern for this behavior is Christ’s forgiving the believer. “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (Eph. 4:32, NIV).
Conclusion

God designed marriage primarily to be a means by which man would reflect the image of God. It was to assist humanity in their quest to follow the laws and statues of God, and ensure their obedience. It was also designed to be a means of procreation, companionship, and completeness. The devil has been intent on destroying the image of God from the earth, and has levied impactful attacks against the family. The oneness that God desired to create to protect one another, to provide companionship, and to support one another has been placed in jeopardy by selfish desires (James 4:1), disagreement (Amos 3:3), and unresolved conflict (Prov. 17:14), as can be seen in the Old Testament sagas of Adam and Eve, Solomon and his Shulamite bride, and David and Michal. This theological reflection attempted to support the statement that “true unity between husband and wife is a reflection of the character and nature of God. The more your hearts, souls, and lives are unified, the more your marriage honors God, and points others toward Him” (Rienow & Rienow, 2010).