



PART ONE

Foundations

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Naked and Unashamed

So they are no longer two, but one.

MATTHEW 19:6

God designed marriage to be a relationship in which trust, openness, and vulnerability can thrive. He designed the first relationship to be nourishing, enriching, and fruitful. Adam and Eve were the first to experience the joys and miseries of marriage. Let's see what we can learn from this very first couple.

As God was creating matter, light, and life, He declared everything He made to be good. There was one notable exception: "The LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone'" (Genesis 2:18). Sin and the fall had not yet happened. But still it was not good for man to be alone. Why? Simply because God created man for relationship: with Him, in marriage, and with others. But relationships, especially close relationships, are difficult. In fact, it seems that our relationships with those we love most are the relationships most difficult of all to manage. Why is this? Let's look at what happened between Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden for some clues.

These two people were the last creations of God. They were the pinnacle of His work, a perfect man and a perfect woman, joined together and living in perfect harmony in a perfect world. We don't know exactly what Eden was like, but we can imagine there being no limits on time or money or any other resource.

Imagine you are in the most relaxed and beautiful setting and experiencing total enjoyment and peace of mind. Our imaginary Eden is as close as we will get to Eden this side of heaven. Here were Adam and Eve in this wonderful setting, anticipating a wonderful life together, knowing God intimately, and without a care in the world. The Bible says,

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.
(Genesis 2:24–25)

This passage is quoted by Jesus and by the apostle Paul as the foundation for understanding marriage. By letting Jesus and Paul amplify our understanding of it, we can learn a great deal about what God intended marriage to be.

Oneness and Intimacy in Marriage

In Matthew 19, the Pharisees were questioning Jesus about divorce. “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” they asked (Matthew 19:3). The Pharisees and scribes had been debating about the conditions under which a man could divorce his wife. In asking Jesus, they weren’t really interested in the right answer; they were merely hoping to trap Jesus into giving a “politically incorrect” response that would diminish His popularity with the people. As on other occasions, this attempt to trap Him failed. In answering them, Jesus went straight to Genesis to reveal the essence of what God was thinking about marriage:

“Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.
(Matthew 19:4–6)

Although this passage is frequently cited to emphasize the seriousness of divorce in God’s eyes, what Jesus says about being joined together in oneness speaks to the core of what this book

is about. In fact, there is something about oneness versus separateness that runs through the heart of Christian theology.

Although oneness is a major theme in Christianity, it's far from easy to describe. In fact, there are very different manifestations and forms of oneness presented—among others the Trinity, the members of the church as the body of Christ, the relationship between Christ and the church, and, of course, marriage, the most fundamental of human relationships.

Oneness means many things to many people, but in His conversation with the Pharisees, Jesus appealed to the ideas of *oneness* and *permanence* in answering their trick question regarding divorce. He seems to be telling them that divorce is not God's perfect plan because marriage is fundamentally about two people mysteriously becoming and remaining one for the rest of their lives. Put another way, God's design for marriage is that it be a covenant of spiritual unity in which the souls and hearts of a man and woman are joined before Him and with Him into a "three-fold cord" providing direction and meaning in the bond of love (Ecclesiastes 4:9–12; Ephesians 5:31–32). How does that happen? How do two people somehow become one? The Bible says it is a mystery.

The Mystery of Oneness

Historically, Christians have talked about oneness in marriage as a diamond having several facets: spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical. We will focus on these dimensions in many ways throughout this book. The foundational teaching about oneness, of course, rests in the physical union of husband and wife, but much more is implied. What it means for two people to become "one" is a rich and wonderful mystery. Paul quotes the Genesis passage, then refers to the concept of mystery as he describes what marriage is all about:

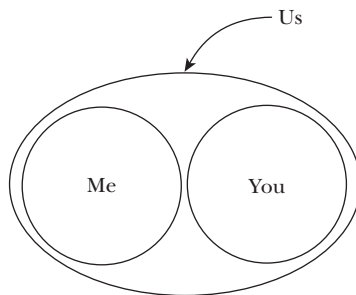
For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery but I am talking about Christ and the church. (Ephesians 5:31–32)

The Greek word for "mystery" comes from the idea of astonishment or a "shut mouth." When something is a mystery, what

can you say? Paul is referring to the mystery of the relationship between Christ and the church, but we believe he is also making a more general point about oneness—that it is inherently mysterious. What do *you* think oneness in marriage means? Stop reading for a moment and ponder this. What might be so wonderful about it that it cannot be easily described?

One thing seems absolutely clear. Biblical oneness in marriage does not mean that one person’s identity becomes lost in the other’s, forming one big blob. Some people fear that this will happen in marriage, that they will somehow lose track of themselves if they grow truly close to another. We’ve heard it said this way: “The two shall become one—but which one?” That is not the concept presented in scripture. In fact, one of the most powerful examples of biblical oneness conveys diversity in unity that is quite the opposite of “blobness.” Paul describes the body of Christ as being one but made up of many individual parts, each unique in its own function (1 Corinthians 12 and 14). It’s a unity (one body), but a unity made up of many unique parts. Although it is mysterious, the concept of oneness lies at the very core of Christianity.

The following diagram conveys a healthy view of oneness in marriage. Note that there are two distinct persons coming together in the marital union: a “you” and a “me.” But there is also a third identity of “us” that is born out of the connection between “me” and “you.” One person’s identity is never to be lost in the other, but God’s design is that the two come together in a powerful way to form a new entity that is unique in and of itself. Beyond this limited understanding, oneness really is mysterious. You can’t quite describe it, but you probably know when you and your mate are experiencing it and when you’re not.



The concept of mystery implies that something is not specifically defined. This suggests great freedom in the way you express the unique oneness of your marriage. Because oneness is mysterious, there is not one “cookie cutter” way you *should* develop it. You can be creative in the ways you express it over the years. Research on successful and happy marriages reveals a great diversity in the ways happy couples relate. But there’s very little diversity in how unhappy couples relate—usually with cold distance or chronic conflict. These patterns are quite common and not at all unique from one unhappy couple to another. Simply put, couples are very different in the ways they express oneness, but they fall into well-worn ruts in the ways they destroy it.

We will help you keep out of these ruts by teaching you how to avoid the attitudes and behaviors that destroy the experience of oneness and intimacy. In Chapter Sixteen, we will focus on ways to help you develop spiritual oneness, the most mysterious oneness element of all.

Permanence in Oneness

When Jesus said, “what God has joined together, let man not separate,” he clearly conveyed the sense that marriage is to be a relationship of permanence (Matthew 19:6). “Until death do us part” is the way this is commonly expressed in marital vows. Scripture leaves us with no doubt that God loves all people, including those who divorce, even though He hates divorce (Malachi 2:16). But this is not a book about the theology of divorce. It’s about preventing divorce and enabling you to realize the full promise of your marriage. It is a book for couples who want to make their marriages all they can be—marriages that will last and that fully express the mystery of oneness with joy, confidence, growing love, and fruitfulness.

In Chapter Fourteen, “The Power of Commitment,” we will talk more in depth about permanence and maintaining a marriage through good times and bad. For now, consider this one crucial fact about the need for the kind of commitment that supports lasting love in marriage: it is the sense of permanence based in a healthy and strong commitment that allows a marriage to thrive even though it is made up of two imperfect beings. One of

the greatest problems for marriages these days is that people have grown to expect more than is possible from their relationships. Should you aim high for what your marriage can be? Sure. Are we arguing for settling for mediocrity in marriage? Not at all. But we do want you to grapple with the fact that people have come to expect levels of sustained attraction to, and acceptance from, their mates that are rare if not impossible. The unrealistic expectations hurt perfectly good marriages. Marriages can be great, but will not be perfect, and marriages that succeed provide a huge number of benefits in life for the spouses and their children. The reality of two people thriving through the trials and imperfections of life trumps the fantasy of perfection.

One of the greatest benefits of having the type of commitment that fuels a belief in permanence is that it provides the foundation for true, deeper intimacy and acceptance, to which we now turn.

The Nature of God and Marriage

There are many reasons why marriage matters in society. That has been a topic of many books and discussions, but it is not our focus here. Closer to our focus is the question, “Why is marriage so important to understanding life?” The answer lies in the depth to which marriage signifies important characteristics about God.

Consider the fact that marriage plays a central role throughout the Bible. First of all, marriage is the main event in the Genesis account of creation. Further, the marriages of major figures of the Bible are prominent throughout the Old Testament—including all the elements of joy and beauty, conflict and misery. In the Old Testament, marriage is a metaphor for the relationship between God and Israel (for example, Isaiah 54:5f; Jeremiah 2:3). In the New Testament, Jesus performed His first miracle at a wedding by changing water into wine (John 2:1–11). He taught about marriage numerous times during his ministry (Matthew 5, Matthew 19, Luke 16). In addition, the apostle Paul wrote a great deal about marriage (Ephesians 5, 1 Corinthians 7, and Colossians 3:18–19). And one of the final events described in the Bible is the future wedding supper of the lamb, described in the book of Revelation. What

that depicts is the full union of Jesus Christ and the church. The Bible both begins and ends with marriage.

All this emphasis on marriage throughout the Bible makes clear that marriage matters because marriage reflects who God is and how He relates to us. Now combine this thought with the teaching in Genesis 1:26–27:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

It was important to God to make us in His image and sustain us in marriage through the process of oneness with Him and each other. This is a deep and wonderful truth that holds meaning far beyond what we can explore in this book. Here we want to note two truths based on the teachings we have cited. One, in some important way, we all bear the image of God. Two, in marriage, God reveals essential truths about His nature and His relationship with us. Through your marriage, and as two people made in the image of God, you are taking part in something much bigger—how God chooses to reflect who He is to the world.

Naked and Unashamed: The Deep Longing in Us All

Now we get to the really interesting part. Here are Adam and Eve, living in the Garden of Eden, enjoying their honeymoon, and experiencing something really amazing. Think about this verse again:

The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.
(Genesis 2:25)

Naked and no shame. What does that mean to you? We commonly hear these ideas expressed when we ask people to think about it:

Closeness	Fearlessness	Acceptance
Vulnerability	Accessibility	Innocence

No one can say what that was really like for Eve and Adam, but this passage captures something powerful, something most people really want in their relationship. Although many marriages end up in great pain and frustration, most people seem to genuinely desire the kind of closeness and acceptance implied in God's original model. When looking for a mate, were you looking for someone to argue with? Of course not! Like most couples, you were looking for someone to be your best friend and support—a mate for your soul. You were drawn to your partner not because of the inevitable conflicts you would have but because you sensed in him or her the possibility of a shameless relationship with absolute acceptance—something few of us have ever known, but all of us have longed for.

So Adam and Eve, the perfect couple, were created perfectly for one another, and were able to experience the joy of knowing one another in an awesome and perfect world. How long did that last? No one knows. But it didn't last forever. Something happened that is described in Genesis 3. Most couples start out with an experience that feels something like the experience of Adam and Eve. But then something happens to them as well. Barriers to oneness begin to overtake their sense of connection. They become wall builders instead of bridge builders.

Barriers to Oneness

Although we are created for relationship, and marriage is the most fundamental of human relationships, things don't always go the way we want them to. In marriage as in other relationships, we are frustrated by barriers that limit our ability to fully enter into the blessings we've longed for. Let's look at several kinds of barriers that get in the way.

The No-Trespassing Tree and the Fear of Rejection

The events described in Genesis 3 include the perfect couple's temptation, their sin, and their fall from the perfect state. These

are important topics to be sure, and they lead theologians to explore weighty matters beyond the scope of this book. Because this is a book about relationships, we will focus on what happened to Adam and Eve in their relationship. They had been created for each other to live freely and fruitfully in paradise. They had only one limiting admonition to observe: they were not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:17). They had a world of exciting possibilities open to them. Only this one choice was off-limits. That one limit became the point for temptation. Think of Adam and Eve's whole world (or yours, for that matter) as a compass, with 360 degrees of possible directions they could go. It was as if God said, 359 degrees are fine, but just don't take this one path. Much more was open to them than was out of bounds. People often think of God as limiting us; they don't see that He wants us to know of the limits we must observe in order to fully partake of the wonderful diversity of life that is in bounds!

Satan tempted the first couple to doubt what God had said (Genesis 3:1) and to doubt that God really had their best interests at heart (Genesis 3:4, 5). They doubted God's goodness and sinned—they ate from the tree that they were not to touch.

Once they had sinned, the couple did a very curious thing. They immediately covered themselves up.

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. (Genesis 3:7)

Consider this. They had seen this tree with their *eyes*, grabbed the forbidden fruit with their *hands*, and eaten it with their *mouths*. So why were they covering what they covered? Tradition and some translations say they made loin coverings. Why did they cover that part of their bodies? Why not make fig-leaf blindfolds because they had seen the tree with their eyes, or fig-leaf mittens because they had touched the fruit with their hands, or fig-leaf gags because they had eaten the fruit with their mouths? There are two answers to this question. First, they covered up the part of their bodies that was probably one of their most wonderful ways of expressing their intimacy. In fact, because the whole picture of oneness is rooted in the expression of physical union

(one flesh), what we see is the shattering of sexual oneness in this story.

Second, the couple no longer felt the glorious freedom of utter acceptance, so *they covered up where they were most obviously different*. Let that one sink in a bit. Isn't that what we all do all the time? We cover up our thoughts, feelings, and opinions more when we are with someone who might see things differently from us. There's no fear of rejection when people see things the way we see them. It's our differentness that leads to our fear of rejection. In marriage, it's the same way. The very differences that are so much a part of our attraction to begin with eventually become the basis for our friction and frustration. For far too many couples, their poor ways of handling these differences create barriers to oneness that keep growing and eventually destroy the whole marriage. Careful research solidly confirms this.

In the next part of the story, God confronts Adam and Eve about their sin. Their reply is noteworthy:

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?" He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."
(Genesis 3:8–10)

Do you think God somehow lost track of Adam and Eve, needing to ask where they were hiding? It seems more likely that God wanted them to think about the question, as in "What have you done? Where are you now?" Adam's answer is even more interesting as he displays his motive for hiding—fear. After they sinned, it was the fear of rejection that drove them to cover up from one another and hide out from God. This was a fear they had not known before their disobedience. Along with sin and shame come a sense of separateness and a terrible fear of rejection.

Fear lays the foundation for many barriers in marriage, as couples seek to protect themselves from rejection, rather than recklessly give themselves to one another in love. By fear, we are referring to the fear of being close because of the hurt and rejec-

tion that might come. Couples fear the danger of the thing they most long for! Such fear works against showing love, but, at the same time, love is also the most powerful antidote to it. As the Apostle John wrote, “perfect love drives out fear” (1 John 4:18). Our hope in this book is to help you use active love to drive out fear in your marriage.

The Barriers of Sin and Selfishness and the Power of Love

The barriers of sin and selfishness are embedded in the story of Adam and Eve. We like to call special attention to these two things as we consider the common barriers to oneness in marriage. A marriage brings together two imperfectly motivated people who strongly desire intimacy but are afraid of being hurt. When they do hurt each other, it is because they have been motivated by these selfish and self-protective desires. James pinpoints such selfish desires as a root cause of destructive conflict:

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. (James 4:1–3)

As believers in Jesus Christ, we have been set free to love and serve one another. It is this love that enables us to overcome our basic selfishness. Look how Paul points out that love is the essential message of the law, and then contrasts such love with the corrosiveness in relationships where love is not leading the way.

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. (Galatians 5:13–15)

Paul contrasts servant-hearted love with self-indulgence and hurtfulness that destroy relationships. Scripture is filled with such warnings and admonitions because such patterns are so very common. But your God-enabled ability to love in other-centered ways will affect every relationship you are in—with your spouse, family, church, and coworkers, and with God. We want you to see the ideas and suggestions in this book as tangible ways to put your love in action. A true lasting promise is rooted in a love that acts. It is in motion, and it is this kind of love that keeps a marriage protected from self-destructive danger and more open to its fullest blessings.

This brings us to another important point. This book is not primarily about discipleship in the broader sense of that word. Our focus is not on what you can or need to be doing to know Christ more deeply or to follow Him more closely in your own life. Although those actions are absolutely essential, we are focusing on that aspect of discipleship that has to do with living biblically in marriage. We believe this will result in a healthy, joyous, loving, and lasting marriage that will bring honor to God. And if you are sincere about growing in your capacity to “serve one another in love,” what we share with you will be that much easier to put in action. There is no substitute for growing spiritually when it comes to fueling great relationships, especially your marriage. The desire to change patterns in your marriage begins at a place deep in your own heart, with a commitment to learn how to improve the ways you relate to your mate. Before moving on to the next chapter, which reveals patterns that can destroy or build up marriages, there’s one final barrier to oneness and intimacy that needs to be discussed.

Not Knowing What Better to Do

One of the most beautiful things Jesus ever said was “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31). Known as the Golden Rule, this statement from His Sermon on the Mount embodies the call to love in the simplest of terms. It also puts the emphasis on the word “do.” But wanting to do what’s right and knowing how to do it are two different things. There is a common belief among Christians with which we take issue: it’s the belief

that if your heart and soul are in harmony with God, you'll somehow automatically know exactly *what* to do in your marriage and how to do it. We don't buy that. Prospering spiritually does not mean that you know how to do the things that nurture a marriage. For example, do you know *how* to really listen to your mate, even when tensions are high or you disagree? More important, can you stop an argument before damaging things are said? Do you know *how* to problem-solve as a team, *how* to work through the process of forgiveness together, *how* to clarify your deepest expectations, and *how* to enhance and deepen commitment? These are valuable "how-to" things you can learn, and when learned well, they can help you develop and keep the kind of marriage you want most. They are practical ways to put your love in action.

Perfection is not possible, of course. We will never restore ourselves to Eden. Heaven will more than take care of that. But it is possible to avoid many of the pitfalls that snag far too many couples. In the rest of this book, we hope to teach you a number of concepts and techniques that can help you stay together, stay happy, and more fully enter the blessings God intends for your marriage.

Doing Your Part

Oneness requires that we do our best to break down the barriers in order to open up the paths to intimacy. Spend some time thinking over what you've read in this chapter. What do you think about when you think of oneness? intimacy? barriers? being naked and unashamed? What are some of the barriers you are more concerned about in your relationship? What do you think Christian marriage is all about? Why does marriage, especially your own marriage, matter to God?