

THE GREATEST HUMAN CONTRACT

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on January 19, 1958 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC.

Several years ago I read in the "Reader's Digest" an account of how the United Nations came to establish its permanent home on the East River in New York City. The story was a very exciting one about how various sites in America were being considered as the permanent home, while settlement in some foreign country was still a possibility. As time began to run out, John A. Rockefeller, Jr, conceived the idea of clearing a section of low-rent tenements, or slums, on the East Side, thus making available to the U. N. a large section of land. There was rather feverish activity. A great many people had to be seen and agreements had to be arrived at quickly. Toward the end of the time, as I recall, an agreement to release certain properties was written on the back of a menu in one of New York's restaurants. A strange contract, for it involved more than \$6,000,000 worth of property. We are all glad, of course, that the activities were successful, and that the U. N. now has its magnificent building in the strategic location in New York City.

Nearly every visitor to New York visits the R. C. A. building and sees the group of buildings that surround it. The ground on which that family of buildings is built belongs to Columbia University. There is a heavy annual rent, of course, but the most significant fact is that at the end of ninety-nine years all of the buildings on that property revert in their ownership to Columbia University. I cannot help but think about that important document somewhere in some vault in New York which says that when ninety-nine years have passed the owners and builders of those buildings no longer will own them. They will belong to Columbia University.

A Man, A Woman, and God

There are many important contracts in our world. Usually we do not think in terms of huge ones like the ones just mentioned. The most important contracts in most of our lives are the ones that we sign when we buy a home, or a car, or make some other sizable investment. We speak of large industrial contracts and contracts of many other kinds, but the most important human contract on earth is the contract that a man and a woman make when they marry.

In the nineteenth chapter of Matthew, Christ is quoted as saying, "And there came unto him Pharisees, trying him, and saying, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? And he answered and said, Have ye not read, that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh? So that there are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." (Matt. 19:3-6). As Jesus answered the question in the long ago: he was saying that marriage is an agreement involving a man and a woman and God. Not merely a man and a woman, but "what God hath joined together let not man put asunder."

Marriage is an agreement by which a man and a woman consent to live together as husband and wife, mutually accepting all of the responsibilities that this relationship entails and properly expecting all the privileges and rights which pertain thereto. The certificate of marriage is issued by the state, but the promises which are made are binding in the sight of God. Marriage, according to the scriptures, is a union of two personalities under the laws of God and in the sight of men.

It is to continue for the natural lives of both of the parties contracting the agreement. There is only one fully and completely honorable way for marriage to end and that is in death. The only other reason given in the scriptures whereby one of the parties may be released from the marriage ties is adultery on the part of the other member to the marriage. All of the other reasons which are given among men, whereby people so easily feel that marriage ties are no longer binding, are outside of the instructions and teachings given in the Bible.

The Vows

When a young couple comes in that sacred moment to enter into this contractual agreement with each other and with God, they are usually asked something like this: "John, do you take Mary to be thy lawfully wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony, and do you promise to love, honor, cherish and keep her both in sickness and in health, and do you promise that forsaking all others you will keep yourself unto her alone as long as you both shall live?" Then, there is a pause and John says, "I do." When he has said "I do" to that question he has pledged himself for life. Next, Mary is asked to take the same vow.

In our day and age there is a tendency to speak lightly of marriage and to feel that there are extenuating circumstances of many kinds which relieve those who have made such promises as I have just mentioned from keeping their promises. I want to emphasize with all the power that I have that it is a dangerous thing to think lightly of the promises that we make in that sacred moment of marriage, and it is a dangerous thing to think that other circumstances are of such a nature that the binding responsibility of marriage is relaxed.

In this relationship not only does the boy pledge to keep himself free from all others of the opposite sex, and the girl likewise, but also they both promise to leave father and mother behind. When a young couple marries it is most unwise for them to live with either of the

parents . Marriage is the beginning of a new home. As God said it in the beginning and as Christ repeated it, a man is to leave father and mother and cleave unto his wife. A wife is to leave father and mother and cleave unto her husband. Sometimes geographical separation from beloved parents is necessary.

Marriage is the most intimate relationship that human beings know on earth, and because it is so vitally important to the happiness of the two involved it must be approached most carefully. Since marriage is built on promises made before God and binding for life it is vital that it be established right and kept right. The words of the poet describe what I conceive to be the ideal relationship, "Two minds with but a single thought; Two hearts that beat as one." There is no other relationship on earth that is as intimate and as meaningful as the relationship of marriage, and that is why we say it is the greatest human contract.

Two Necessary Things

Since marriage is binding for the entire natural life of the two parties, it ought to be entered into only after very careful and very complete consideration. We are all familiar with the old adage, "Marry in haste, repent at leisure." And there are a great many people who have learned that it is more than an adage. It is the truth. In the making of a marriage there are primarily two things that determine the eventual happiness of those involved. The first is the careful selection of a mate, and the second is diligent effort on the part of both husband and wife. A marriage in which the mates are not carefully selected may succeed, but only under difficulty. A marriage in which there is not diligent effort on the part of husband and wife cannot succeed.

To you who have not yet entered marriage, we would speak a few words of admonition. In the selection of a mate the old American way of boy meeting girl, completely independent of any advice or guidance from older people, is a dangerous path. It was last Lord's day that we mentioned that in the Hebrew tradition the patriarch, or father, arranged the marriages. We are also aware that in oriental customs even down until now the father of the family arranges the marriages. Before we in America throw up our hands in horror at marriages arranged for us, we need to stop and think about our way of doing it. The movies and novels and magazines have led us to believe that young people have a kind of instinct that guides them in some unexplained way to pick the right person. "When you see her you immediately fall in love with her. Somehow you know she is the right one." To use a phrase from Mark Twain, "Simply wind on the stomach, my son." The romantic idea of love at first sight is pure hokum. It can only be a physical attraction and Hollywood has proved and reproved hundreds of times that this conception of marriage is false. Marriage cannot be entered into on the basis of love at first sight, for it is only a physical relationship that does not last.

Three Steps

There are several steps that need to be taken in the selection of a mate. The first of these takes place when the child is young. A devoted Christian mother and father begin to plant in the young mind of grammar school age the kind of person that he ought to grow up to marry. Through high school years there ought to be a good bit of effort expended in helping the child to establish some requirements for a mate. Then, with that body of solid principles to guide him the young person ought to be free to go out and make his own choice. A choice made by others is not ideal.

With these principles deeply imbedded in his heart the young person of college age begins to weight and evaluate the young people he associates with. After a while he begins to think that he has found the right one. Then, instead of a quick marriage there need to be some consultations. The relationship between young people and parents ought to be such that a boy comes home and says, "Mom, I'm going with Sadie Smith, and I think a lot of her, and I think that she might make me a good wife. What do you think?" The mother ought to do some soul-searching and then give some solid advice. Daddy ought to be invited in, too. Still other mature, judicious friends should be consulted. Since marriage is for life and since a young person is obviously young and inexperienced, having never chosen a life-partner before, he ought to do what he does when he picks a profession. When a boy picks a profession he goes to his teachers at school and says, "What are the opportunities in this field? What is the training needed?" Then he talks with some others and says "What do you think? Do you think it would be good for me to become whatever it is he is thinking of?"

Why in the world have we allowed ourselves to get into the position where young people think that if anybody advises them about marriage that it is out of place? Surely the young person will make the final decision, but I am pleading with you young people to do what a young man of my acquaintance did a few years ago. He was going with a girl, a fine girl, but I know for a fact that he asked at least a dozen people to give their advice. "Now, you know me," he said, "and I think you know her, what do you think? Would we make a good pair?" Since marriage is for life there needs to be preliminary guidance, then free initiative on the part of the young person, then careful consultation with mature, judicious friends, and finally the decision. That decision ought to be based on the consideration of such things as mutual backgrounds. Nationally and racially they ought to be alike. Educationally, economically, socially, and religiously their lives should be alike if they want theirs to be a happy home that will last.

Walking Out

No one ought to walk out from under his marriage responsibilities, because when he does he makes two grave mistakes: First of all, he goes back on his promises, promises made in the hearing of God. Secondly, when a person quickly and unadvisedly leaves the marriage responsibilities he places the other person in a position where he may be mutually responsible for the other person's

committing of adultery. So spoke Jesus in Matthew 5:32, a part of the sermon on the mount: "I say unto you, that everyone that putteth away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, maketh her an adulteress: and whosoever shall marry her when she is put away committeth adultery." (Matt. 5:32). When a man puts away his wife he is encouraging her to enter into relationship with some other man which is the committing of adultery. So the person who puts away his wife becomes mutually responsible for the one who is put away in his or her sin. As I read to you last week, we have certain responsibilities to our husbands or wives, and not to discharge those responsibilities is to encourage the other person into sin for which we likewise will be held responsible. These are serious things that we have been saying. My only apology is that we have not said them this plainly before. They are God's teachings; they are out of God's book, and they will help us all to be happily and scripturally married.

The greatest human contract is when a man and a woman pledge their love to each other for life. That contract is second only to one other, and the other is hardly a human contract for it is the agreement when a man pledges his love to God in becoming a Christian. That is the divine privilege of every human being and it has even more far-reaching possibilities for joy and happiness than marriage, and therefore is of greater importance than this human contract of which we have been speaking. We close this study of things that are deeply important to all of us, by reminding you that the most important commitment you ever make is the commitment you make to God and Christ when you become a Christian. The invitation is extended; we urge you to come and accept Christ and be saved.