

**Priorities**  
by Lloyd Biddle

*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it, that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word*  
*Ephesians 5:25-26*

*That they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient, to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed.*

*Titus 2:4-5*

Dr. Robertson McQuilken was the 22-year president of Columbia College and Bible Seminary in South, Carolina. His wife of 40 years, Muriel, was stricken with Alzheimer's disease at a relatively young age and her disease had reached an advanced stage. Since he was a gifted speaker and leader, many people urged Dr. McQuilken to arrange for Muriel to be cared for in an institution so that he could continue with his duties. But in 1990, Dr. McQuilken announced his retirement to become the full-time caregiver for his wife. This wonderful account of the unfailing love of Dr. McQuilken helps me, as a married man and promise keeper to Deborah, remember what my life priorities are.

As a Christian, I am reminded of what Jesus said about what His disciples' priorities should be in Matthew 22:37-40: ***"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."*** Christians are called to love God first and foremost. Next to this high command, we are called to love our neighbors in the same way that we love ourselves. And I believe that Jesus tells us who the "chief neighbor" is in Matthew 19:4-6 when he says: ***"Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning made them male and female and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no man separate."*** For a married person, the "chief neighbor", the most critical person to practice obedience in the area of loving your fellow man is your spouse.

Married people are commanded by God to love their spouses sacrificially, unconditionally and unfailingly. Now this is the gold standard for a Christian marriage: undying love and commitment. Unfortunately, not all Christians who marry live up to it. In fact, sometimes the most visible and central people in our Christian communities fail in this key area of Christian witness and the name of Christ and His body suffer damage because of those failures. This past month, the impending divorces of two well-known

pastoral couples made national headlines and shocked Christians and unbelievers alike. How could these pastors who had married dozens of couples, preached and taught on the sanctity and blessing of marriage and served as role models for their flocks, find themselves in divorce court? Here is an excerpt from an e-mail I received from one disillusioned Christian single after she heard the news and grappled with this question: ***“I am trying to hard to keep a positive outlook on marriage. But I have to be honest. I’m so disappointed in how the marriages are in the Christian community, not just those in the spotlight. But, I see it in the churches here too.”***

There are many modern threats to strong Christian marriages. There are our busy high-tech lifestyles, our sex-crazed culture, financial problems posed by easy credit and self-centeredness, just to name a few. However, in my opinion, another key factor in divorce among Christians is misguided priorities. Not so long ago Debbie and I counseled a young married couple I’ll call Ken and Dina (not their real names). Only two years into their marriage, they began to experience problems that they needed some help resolving. We met with them five times over the span of two months. During these sessions, it became clear to me that this couple loved each other and had a relationship with Jesus Christ. Both Ken and Dina worked and Dina complained that she was not seeing enough of her husband. Ken worked two jobs and about 55 hours a week and he was heavily involved in a non-profit substance abuse ministry during his “free time”. While Ken was away working and serving other people, Dina felt neglected and lonely. Conversely, Ken felt that Dina did not understand or support him in his personal and professional goals. Debbie and I counseled them both about the fundamental requirements for a happy marriage: self-sacrificing love and a commitment to putting the needs of the other person above your own. It became clear to Debbie and I, after five counseling sessions that our advice and pleas were falling on deaf ears. A few short weeks after our counseling sessions ended, I got a late night call from Ken saying that his wife had moved in with her mother and that he was unwilling to make any adjustments to win her back.

What can you do to avoid losing focus on your own marriage? I have 2 suggestions. The first one is the toughest but perhaps the most important: ask your spouse where they think they sit on your priority list? If your spouse says that you put other people and things above her or him, this is your notice that you need to take immediate steps to change that perception. The changes that may be required could be very small like get home on time, or very big like cutting back on some things you really love to do, but your willingness to ask the question and respond (or unwillingness) tells a lot about how important your marriage is to you. Second, understand what your spouses needs are and commit to meeting them. Dr. Willard Harley in his book, *“His Needs, Her Needs”* states that a married woman’s top five needs are affection, conversation, honesty and openness, financial support and family commitment. While a man’s needs are sexual fulfillment (Amen!), recreational companionship, an attractive spouse, domestic support and admiration. Growing and mature couples are able to talk about these things and take appropriate action to improve when needs are not being met. They are willing and able to do this because they understand that love is more about service than sentimentality. Marriage is about two people willfully and joyfully serving each other.

In 1990, Dr. McQuilken announced his resignation from Columbia Bible College with the following statement:

*My dear wife, Muriel, has been in failing mental health for about 8 years. So far I have been able to carry both her ever-growing needs and my leadership responsibilities at Columbia Bible College. But recently it has become apparent that Muriel is contented most for the time she is with me and almost none of the time I am away from her. It is not just "discontent". She is filled with fear-even terror-that she has lost me and always goes in search of me when I leave home. It is clear to me that she needs me now full-time. The decision was made, in a way, 42 years ago, when I promised to care for Muriel "in sickness and in health, till death do us part." So as a man of my word, integrity has something to do with my decision. But so does fairness. She has cared for me fully and sacrificially all these years; if I cared for her for the next 40 years I would not be out of debt. Duty, however, can be grim and stoic. But there is more; **I love Muriel. She is a delight to me**, her warm love, occasional flashes of that wit I used to relish so, her happy spirit and tough resilience in the face of her continual distressing frustration. I do not have to care for her. I get to! It is a high honor to care for so wonderful a person."*

My prayer for you is that you will take Dr. McQuilken's words and his story to heart this month and apply the lessons learned to your marriage and priority list. And may you never forget to love and delight in your spouse until the very end.