



Decide to love.  
Put your spouse first.  
Submit to one another.  
Treat one another with respect.  
Try to understand one another.  
Give marriage your full effort.

# principles for a **strong** marriage

**What can we learn from John Wesley's difficult marriage?**

By Ken Horn

**T**he 33-year-old man stood anxiously eyeing a small pile of folded slips of paper. His ministry was in high gear and he was thinking of marriage. As a minister, he was torn, not wanting to dilute his ministry ... or miss God's will with regard to a spouse. John Wesley — the founder of Methodism and one of the greatest revivalists in church history — steeled himself to draw, at random, one of the slips.

At the time, he was ministering in a fledgling colony in the New World known as Georgia. His heart said yes to Sophy Hopkey; his head said no.

So he drew lots to decide their future. On one slip of paper he wrote, "Marry." On the other two he wrote, "Not this year" and "Think of it no more." When he drew the latter slip, a mix of competing emotions rushed over him. Later he would write that he had once again been "a brand snatched from the burning." (He had been rescued from a burning house as a small child.)

A decade later, in the prime of his ministry in England, he did marry. And, from the start, his marriage was an unequivocal failure. He had told Methodist leaders that it was "a cross that had to be taken up."

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Wesley, who kept a copiously noted journal for 55 years, failed to even mention his wedding in it.

Early biographers blamed Mrs. Wesley. Some of this was fair, some was biased. Molly was certainly unstable. She did verbally — even physically — abuse her husband. She was even known to disrupt his meetings. And yet she was not entirely to blame. There were biblical principles that could have made the marriage better. These six principles will strengthen any marriage today.

### 1 Decide to love.

Biblical love is both a commitment and a decision. Christians are commanded to love one another (1 John 4:7,8). How much more, then, should spouses, who have vowed to stand by one another in good times and bad, remain committed in their love?

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,” is the biblical injunction (Ephesians 5:25, NIV). It is not a request, but a command. Through thick and thin, even if “romantic” love has faded, God says, “Love your spouse.”

True agape love as revealed in God’s Word, knows nothing of a shallow, sentimental love that bolts at the first sign of trouble.

Love is about the only thing that can be given away and leave you with more than you had before.

It is deeper — intended to be like Christ’s love for the church. The marital bond is a mutual commitment that requires obedience — and when God’s direction is fully obeyed, it is the surest way to retain romance.

When husbands and wives love each other, it is mutually beneficial. Love is about the only thing that can be given away and leave you with more than you had before. Galatians 5:14 says, “The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” Your spouse is your closest neighbor.

### 2 Put your spouse first.

Human nature puts self first. “In this same way,” the apostle Paul says, “husbands ought to love their wives as their own bod-

ies. He who loves his wife loves himself” (Ephesians 5:28).

Sacrificial missionary and consummate Bible student that Wesley was, the Bible’s teachings on marriage were strangely lost to him. “In respect of traveling abroad,” he told his ministerial charges, “the Methodist preacher who has a wife should be as though he has none.”

The apostle Paul had taught that those who married would face a challenge like this. “A married man is concerned about the affairs of this world — how he can please his wife. ... A married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world — how she can please her husband” (1 Corinthians 7:33,34). But Wesley’s application of verse 29 ignored the context and the apostle’s other teachings on the subject.

### 3 Submit to one another.

John Wesley was a man of God with a passion for souls. But he was married to his ministry. If concessions were to be made, he expected Molly to make them.

In wedding ceremonies, the prime scriptural marriage passage in Ephesians 5 is often begun with verse 22: “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.” But the passage really begins with verse 21, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” It is at the heart of a loving relationship for husband and wife to sub-

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mit to one another. This is what strengthens a marriage, not some lopsided appeal to male headship. (Such leadership is biblical, but a problem arises when it is asserted in an unbiblical way.)

It is telling that in Wesley's *Explanatory Notes on the Whole Bible*, he skips verse 21 altogether, jumping directly from verse 20 to verse 22.

#### **4 Treat one another with respect.**

Make it a priority to communicate, to genuinely share with one another in meaningful ways.

"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths," Ephesians 4:29 admonishes, "but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."

Molly certainly erred in this more than John, but a simple decision to follow this command works wonders for any union. Otherwise, "If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other" (Galatians 5:15).

Instead, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32). Scripture's directions for general interpersonal relationships certainly apply also to husbands and wives.

#### **5 Try to understand one another.**

Give your spouse a courtesy that many give to strangers more quickly than their spouses — your undivided attention.

Certainly John Wesley fell short in this respect.

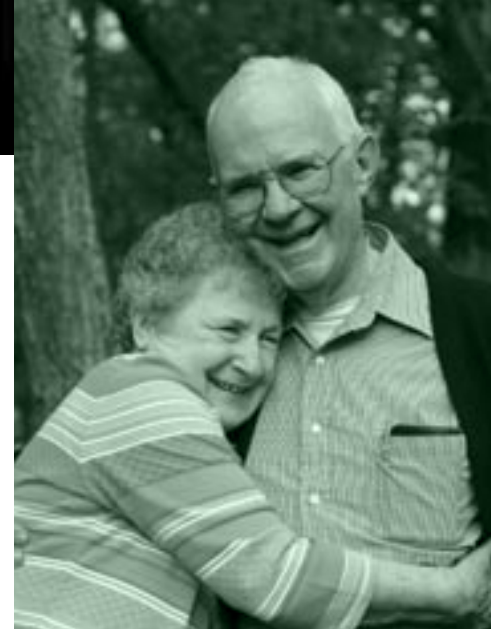
Give each other the dignity of really listening — and caring about what you hear. Make a genuine attempt to put yourself in your spouse's shoes. Show an interest in the things your spouse appreciates, and search for things you can enjoy doing together.

Apply the general injunction of Romans 12:10 to your marriage: "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves."

#### **6 Give marriage your full effort.**

"And whatsoever ye do," Paul wrote, "do it heartily, as to the Lord" (Colossians 3:23, KJV).

If the very smallest things are worth the believer's full effort in



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glorifying God, how much more the marriage union. Little that is worthwhile comes easily. For a marriage to work, it requires humility, patience and forbearance. "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love" (Ephesians 4:2, NIV).

Another apostle sums up the

entire secret of having a godly marriage. "Above all," Peter wrote, "love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8).

It is not likely that anyone reading this article will have a life as busy as John Wesley's. But all married readers will face the challenge of erring in the same

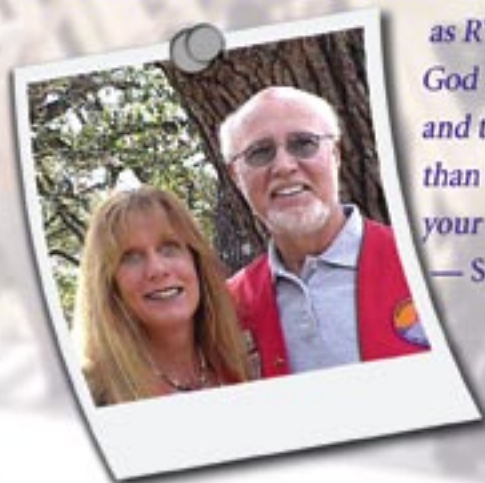
areas in which he and Molly failed. The decision to pour our energies into biblical love and follow the Scripture's guidance will work wonders in any couple's relationship. **tpe**

KEN HORN is managing editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*.

E-mail your comments to [tpe@ag.org](mailto:tpe@ag.org).

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