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The Role of Affection in Courtship and Marriage: Some Reflections

by Richard A. Heaps*

As she sat across from me, she asked why no one had ever given her such an explanation before. I had just finished explaining the reason physical affection can be so out of place during courtship, yet serve such a pleasant purpose and role within marriage.

It seems that before she was married, she and her husband enjoyed a pleasant relationship free of moral problems, but now she was having serious questions about the propriety of enjoying acts of affection with her husband. This had started causing feelings of ambivalence, guilt, anxiety and strain in her marriage. In a way, her lack of awareness surprised me and gave me reason to ponder, so after she left I sat back and reflected on her earlier uncertainties and what I had said to her that had seemed so new and of which she had been so unaware. I recalled my words:

"There is a reason why even the 'smallest' sexual or physical acts are so important within marriage yet so serious when engaged in beforehand. You see, the opportunity to procreate and to have increase is a lasting or eternal opportunity only in the Celestial Kingdom. In other words, the continuation or giving of lives is a celestial blessing. We are given the approved opportunity to approximate that sacred celestial relationship here on the earth only within very rigid conditions established within a legitimate marriage relationship.

"The sexual act, which leads to the giving of life, is sacred, proper and desirable within the bounds of a marriage relationship; however, engaged in by itself without proper physical, emotional and spiritual preparation can be accompanied by physical, emotional or spiritual pain. Therefore, tender embracing, kissing and fondling are an important part of the preparation for the procreative act. Because each of these acts is literally bound to each other in a preparatory physical 'chain,' one may stop this sequence at any point short of the next act only by exerting great will and energy. This is the reason even the 'least' sexual or physical act is so important within marriage yet so serious before marriage...it is intended to lead to 'more'."

"You know," she said to me, "it has always been so confusing that physical affection could be so wrong one moment and so right the next. When I got married I couldn't quite get rid of the feeling of wrongness, but now you seem to be telling me that such affection has actually never been wrong."

"That's correct," I replied. "Such physical intimacy has never suddenly become all right. It has never been

wrong — within marriage. As you know, the setting has always determined the propriety of almost anything we do. Pleasurable, physical affection has always been proper, desirable and even necessary within marriage. You cannot have children without the procreative act, and that act should be prepared for in a tender and considerate manner. This is also why young couples, prior to marriage, need to be so cautious about their physical expressions of affection. Each tender act is intended to lead to more, and will lead to more unless interrupted by determined effort. Such acts are supposed to prepare and physically move a husband and wife forward, toward a culmination of their feelings of love in the procreative act, the mutual creation of life."

After reflecting on this conversation, I recalled another occasion when I was confronted by a young engaged couple who had been having repeated moral problems of a moderately serious nature. After explaining the sequential relationship between various acts of physical affection, they said to me, "We really want to keep our relationship clean, but how do we avoid that natural progression from one act of affection to more serious ones?"

Of course the solution was quite obvious. Don't start! But, they seemed to need more direction and explanation than that simple conclusion offered, so I offered some principles which, if followed, would help them avoid the problem they asked about.

"These principles are very simple, but very practical. The first principle is to avoid being alone together, for long periods of time, in stationary positions. This will help you avoid the environment or circumstances which provides the opportunity for transgression. Stop and think for a moment of the circumstances surrounding each time you have gotten into moral difficulty. Those circumstances have almost always had all three conditions in common."

They interrupted, "But we want to be alone at times to talk about important, personal plans. We can't do that just anywhere."

"Then keep in mind that you do not need to avoid being alone," I reassured. "The principle is to avoid all three conditions at the same time: being alone, for a long time, and in a stationary position. Any one or two of these conditions in combination at the same time will not likely lead to any problem. It is only when the third condition is present along with the other two that you have created the most likely opportunity for transgression.

"The second principle," I said, "is to avoid any behavior which tempts you personally to do more. This will help you avoid the problems associated with the natural 'chain' relationship between various physical acts of affection. If you avoid starting the chain, or if you avoid the temptation, you obviously avoid the later

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transgression. I realize this sounds simplistic, but it will require a significant prior decision and a great deal of commitment on your part."

Hesitatingly, they finally ventured, "We can see the wisdom in your advice, but we have such strong feelings for each other. How can we show our love and affection if we don't kiss and embrace?"

"I realize that as each of you grows in love for the other you want to show your growing love in increasingly stronger ways so that the other person will know you love him or her more now than you did before. Unfortunately, the easiest, most readily accessible way to do this is through more frequent and passionate physical intimacies. This has led to a prevalent untruth in the world that the most desirable expression of affection is a physical or sexual one. This philosophy completely ignores the powerful expressions of affection that can come in other ways such as through our verbal and behavioral communications of warmth, through our respectful acts, and through the countless little things which we can do for each other.

"Once you are married you will find that your physical relationship will be only a very small part of all your interactions. If you begin now to show your inward feelings of love in verbal and in non-sexual ways you will receive two benefits. First, you will enjoy a morally clean relationship during your courtship. Second, you will begin to establish positive habits in the things you do together that will carry over into your marriage and help build even more satisfying and fulfilling ways of behaving toward each other. Then the stronger feelings of mutual respect you will have established will give you a more healthy context for appropriate expressions of physical affection in your marriage."

As I reflected on these two experiences, I wondered what it is that brings about such unawareness among our young people. Then it occurred to me that sometimes we may unintentionally spend so much time cautioning couples about the problems and consequences of immorality that we tend to neglect practical suggestions regarding how to maintain positive, morally clean relationships and also neglect the need to place different kinds of affection in their proper context within courtship and marriage. In summary:

1. We are given the opportunity to approximate the celestial blessing of procreation here on the earth within the context of marriage, and there need be no guilt from enjoying this God-given relationship. The sexual act does not "suddenly" become all right in marriage, but has always been proper, beautiful and even necessary. It is the setting which provides the needed supportive conditions and determines the timeliness and propriety of this act. Marriage is the setting for procreation.

2. The procreative act must be prepared for to avoid physical, emotional or spiritual pain. For this reason even the smallest physical intimacies such as kissing and embracing are bound together in a sequential chain that creates a natural progression culminating in the final sexual act.

3. Since each physical act is intended to lead to the next, this sequence can be stopped only by exerting a great deal of strength and energy. In other words, it is not a matter of weak will that couples are tempted to do more once they have started this physical "chain."

4. To avoid starting this natural "chain" of physical intimacies, couples should avoid any behavior which tempts them to do more.

5. To avoid the environment and circumstances which allow for moral transgression, couples should avoid being alone together, for long periods of time, in stationary positions. That is, they should avoid all three conditions at the same time.

6. As a couple grows in love for each other, it would enhance their courtship and their later marriage to continuously show their growing affection in creative, non-physically-intimate ways.

These principles were helpful to a young woman concerned about the propriety of a physical relationship with her husband, to a young engaged couple concerned about how to keep their relationship morally clean, and to countless others who have heard them. It is hoped they will also be helpful to others who want to establish mutually enhancing relationships.