

Dual Fidelities
By Matthew Swale

“So how did you know you were supposed to marry your wife?”

Our teacher thought for a second before he answered us, an awkward junior high class tipping our hand to reveal hopeless romanticism.

“Well, I had two women in my life at that time, and either one could have made a great wife. I *chose* to love Diane. Love is a decision, a commitment, so I chose Diane to love and be committed to.”

Oh. That wasn't quite what we were looking for, but okay. What did we know about romance anyway?

That raw, untested data was challenged while I was talking to my college mentor. I needed help. I was working at a Christian camp, and a godly young lady named Jackie had captured my interest. I couldn't stop thinking about her.

I dumped a cornucopia of Jackie's attributes before Bill. Interestingly, they all concerned what a good Christian woman she was. They were the sort of thing that would justify a good Christian man *choosing* her. Huh.

My junior high teacher wasn't the only one influencing my view of romance. There's a trend in some Christian circles implying that we *choose* the person we marry, and *that* is love. We love someone when we're committed to him or her, which constitutes love.

Bill blasted that notion when, after politely listening to my monologue, he asked, “Does she trip your trigger?”

“Um...yes. Yes, she does,” I answered.

“That's important, Matt. The woman you marry has to trip your trigger.”

I wasn't sure what to do with this passion-laden idiom; I just knew that I liked the idea. I was glad to be justified in liking Jackie, in part because she was a sweet southern belle with a smile that could disarm legions and level an army.

I realized that I wasn't the only person affected by the aforementioned trend when Lee called one day. "Matt, I really need to talk to you about something. Do you mind if I drive up?"

Lee was one of my best friends, and although he came from a much more charismatic church tradition than I, we had unquestioned common ground in our commitment to living holy lives for our Savior. He drove the three hours, and we took a walk.

Lee was torn. He believed that God had spoken directly to both him and Ashley (including confirmation from others in their church) that they were to get married. God had clearly spoken that this was His will. This looked great on paper until Lee realized how dry their connection was. Ashley was a great woman...but something was missing. He wasn't crazy about her. In short: she didn't trip his trigger.

"But God has *clearly* spoken to us!" Lee reasoned. "Maybe God wants me to learn to love her and be committed to her. That's how God loves us, right? He's faithful to us no matter what."

"But what about verses like Proverbs 5:19 that hint at *attraction... intrigue... passion... things like that*? Hasn't God given us those as directives too? Don't they help us see His will too?" Although the situation didn't sit right with me, my reply was too undeveloped to stick with it.

Lee, with my help, convinced himself that he really was intrigued by the young lady. He was temporarily satisfied. That is, until he called me about five months later: “You mind if I drive up again? We need to talk.”

Sitting at Denny’s, coffee, eggs, and hotcakes formed the right context for his news: “I had to break up with her. I just couldn’t do it anymore, I couldn’t do that to her.”

“Why? Do what to her?” I asked.

“I couldn’t get over what it says in Proverbs 30:21-23, ‘Under three things the earth trembles, under four it cannot bear up: a servant who becomes king, a fool who is full of food, *an unloved woman who is married*, and a maidservant who displaces her mistress.’ I think I could’ve been committed to her just fine, but a woman deserves to have a man *crazy* for her. Apparently that’s really important to God.”

I was stunned. God had taught him that which was undeveloped in my thinking five months earlier: there’s something near to the heart of God about a man who is “off his rocker” for the woman he marries. Fascinating.

One other conversation was formative in my thinking on this topic. I ran into my friend Glenn, and unbeknownst to me, he was in romantic turmoil. What followed was a 45-minute conversation about an impasse with his girlfriend. She was pretty, funny, godly, smart, driven...but something was missing. Everything about her would make her a great wife.

“I don’t know though, I’m just not that excited about her when it’s all said and done. But why? I could easily be committed to her, she’s an excellent woman,” Glenn said.

As we talked, it became clear that we had both been affected by the trend at hand. The overemphasis in both of our circles was similar: we *choose* whom we love. This commitment *is* love.

He was aboard the ship from which Lee had recently defected: the notion that there is something wrong with him for not being crazy about his girlfriend and that he ought to go ahead and be committed to her. After all, she was the total package.

There was nothing wrong with either young lady. But what was missing? As I thought about it more, I realized that even such romantic enigmas aren't foreign to the biblical witness: "There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, *and the way of a man with a maiden*" (Proverbs 30:18-19).

Mysterious, but how gracious of God to include this in His Word!

After mulling over the data with Glenn and later on my own, the following became clear: there are aspects of romance that elude explanation. However, God clearly gives ink to a certain intoxication, an intrigue (Proverbs 5:19; Song of Solomon) that renders "love is a decision" as incomplete. And when those aren't present in the final product, marriage, there are harsh words for such a cerebral union in Proverbs 30:21-23.

Why might it be important to God that these elements be present in romance? Paul tells us in Ephesians 5 what role marriage plays in the Gospel story when, after speaking of man and woman's marital union, he says, "This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church."

If God has given marriage as a microcosmic illustration of the union with Christ offered in the Gospel, then it becomes clearer why the trend that Lee, Glenn, and I have

been affected by is dangerous: it gives a truncated illustration of the Gospel. It doesn't set forward a metaphor for the radical sacrifice that God's love yielded. He is jealous for us who are in Him and affectionate toward us to the utmost. The Gospel is not cerebral.

What I mean is this: if the trend were carried to its logical conclusion, then what kind of God would be presupposed (inasmuch as it serves as a metaphor for His Gospel)? A God whom we love because it is what we are supposed to do? A God who gives us little reason to revel in Him? Whom we must convince ourselves to love? This has been lived out often, and perhaps this has contributed to many non-Christians seeing God as stale and aloof. The trend itself has good intentions--to prevent people from flimsy and fleeting views of romantic love--but has bred an unbalanced view.

In contrast, what kind of God is presupposed in the Gospel-metaphor portrayal by a marriage that is marked by the dual fidelities of passionate intrigue and commitment? A God who is endlessly exciting? A God who is eternally satisfying? A God whom we strive to serve even when feelings lack because He is abundantly good? That's more like it.

Well, that stunning southern belle and I are married. We are delighted that our marriage can serve such a purpose in the Gospel story. We look forward to cultivating a marriage marked by the dual fidelities of passion and commitment. We understand that this is the microcosm that the world needs to see and that we need it too. We recognize that God is honored when both passion and commitment are present, one upholding and perpetuating the other. Romance functions as He intended it to when that's the case.

Oh yeah, and it's a lot more fun than the romance my junior high teacher described.