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A revival of conviction for purity in courtship has been part of the conservative movement among Mennonite churches. But revival must continue to avoid the curses that accompanied the recreational courtship and sub-standard courtship practices of the past.

In the beginning God instituted the home with a simple basic law: "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). Marriage is an exclusive relationship between one man and one woman for life. The wedding ceremony seals and validates the binding together of a man and his wife. The bishop confirms God's recognition of the union by pronouncing, "You may now join your right hands."

Only within the confines of the marriage bond are physical intimacies blessed and sacred. Until the moment of marriage, a young couple has no more right to each other than to any other person. Even engaged couples, although under the bonds of a mutual promise, have not validated their commitment by vows "before God and these witnesses."

Purity is tested in a Christian courtship as emotional closeness develops. The temptation to enjoy physical closeness must be overcome by the help of God, parental guidance, and personal commitment in order to retain a virgin experience until the consummation of marriage. Such discipline is valuable training and a foundation for maintaining a pure relationship after marriage. And the victorious can enjoy marriage without remorse for failure.

A hands-off courtship has been taught but not always followed. Youth have reasoned: "Other Christians have held hands." "If we do not take it any farther, it will be all right." "What could be wrong with what makes us feel so happy?" But such relative and unprincipled reasoning will never lead one right.

God's standard of right is not bent by human reasoning. Men reason that, as long as no one is harmed, actions are neutral. But God, who understands human nature, ordained laws for our blessing. And until sin is called sin, we will continue to live under its curse. Many warn that holding hands is not good because it will lead to sin. But holding hands is wrong not only because it will lead to sin but also because it is sin. Youth feel strong, are not averse to risk, and may even be attracted to the challenge if it is not

clearly taught as sin.

God's law for the marriage relationship to be exclusive implies a second principle. The intimacy of marriage is to be kept sacredly private. But what God designed to aid man in cleaving to his wife, Satan uses to cleave man from his wife. Society communicates their rebellion against moral reserve by bold, unreserved promiscuous indecency.

Among God's children, the temptation to flaunt the exclusive marriage relationship exists in more subtle and attractive forms. Although worldly-influenced marriage counselors energetically advocate the public display of affection as part of a closer relationship, "two, saith he, [and only those two] shall be one flesh" (1 Corinthians 6:16). Broadcasting a secret never makes it more special. The spiritual, rather than the sensual, must be primary for broader social relationships to be kept pure.

Newly married couples find this especially tempting in their new relationship. Without a commitment to guard personal and communal purity, the new liberty of marriage will be desecrated. In some settings peer pressure compels newlyweds to "show" love for each other. Photographers may pressure couples into intimate, suggestive poses that are not fit to display in a godly home.

The security of Christian marriage relies on spiritual strength. This produces emotional stability and physical self-control. Divine love is the only perfect, lasting binder for human relationships. To attempt to correct or strengthen a marriage by the sensual relationship cannot cure the root of man's problem—lust. Public intimacy reveals a lack of discretion and reserve that makes one prone to other moral looseness. "For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die" (Romans 8:13).

Self-centered, self-occupied couples are inconsiderate of the temptations they cause youth and others with their indiscreet conduct. Although the home is semiprivate, parental conduct will affect the purity and moral strength of their children. King David found too late that grievous moral sins follow lapses of casual looseness and indulgence.

A godly Christian home is a bulwark of spiritual safety. Satan's end-time strategy is targeting this haven of holiness. The moral decay of society constantly strains the ties of marriage fidelity. From the privacy of our family living rooms to the aisles of our churches, may we strengthen the fiber of moral fidelity.

—BAS



## *The Personification of God – The Breath of God*

"There is a God, He is alive!" "This God is our God." And this is one of the many characteristics that sets Him apart from all other gods. "Neither is there any breath in their mouths" (Psalm 135:17). One who has no breath has no life.

**The breath of God imparts life.** At Creation God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (Genesis 2:7). Artificial respiration is the human attempt to restore the capacity of breathing to one who has lost his breath. Under certain conditions, artificial respiration does work. But when the Lord God recalls the breath of life from the body, no amount of artificial respiration will restore it. "If he set his heart upon man, if he gather unto himself his spirit and his breath; all flesh shall perish together, and man shall turn again unto dust" (Job 34:14, 15). The act of God in Genesis 2:7 was divine respiration. Indeed, it was the creation of life itself.

The life-giving properties associated with the breath of God are seen in other Scriptures. "Thus saith God the LORD, he that created the heavens, and stretched them out; he that spread forth the earth, and that which cometh out of it; he that giveth breath unto the people upon it, and spirit to them that walk therein" (Isaiah 42:5). Job testified, "The Spirit of God hath made me, and the breath of the Almighty hath given me life" (Job 33:4).

In Ezekiel 37 the vision of dry bones prophesied the future life that God would restore to His people Israel. "Thus saith the Lord GOD; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live" (Ezekiel 37:9). The same Hebrew word that is translated breath is here translated wind. Could these four miraculous, life-giving winds be anything other than the breath of the Almighty, whose presence and power surrounds us?

**The breath of God has power to create.** "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth" (Psalm 33:6). The Word of God is synonymous with the breath of God. As God breathed the word of command, the creation came into existence. "And God said ... and it was so" (Genesis 1:9).

**The breath of God has power to destroy life.** "And he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked" (Isaiah 11:4). "By the blast of God they perish, and by the breath of his nostrils are they consumed" Job 4:9. Not only does the power of God create life, but it also brings divine judgment on the lives of wicked men.

"For Tophet is ordained of old; yea, for the king it is prepared; he hath made it deep and large: the pile thereof is fire and much wood; the breath of the LORD, like a stream of brimstone, doth kindle it" (Isaiah 30:33). It is supposed that the Assyrian regiments of Sennacherib lay encamped in this very valley of Hinnom or Topheth when they were slain by the death angel. Topheth, in the valley of Hinnom, was where the Canaanites and later wicked King Ahaz and Manasseh offered human sacrifices to Molech, including their own children.

Eventually Josiah put an end to these abominations by polluting this area with human bones and other corruption. It became the city cesspool, a place of filth and constant burning. Is it any wonder that later Jews applied the name of this place, Ge Hinnom, or Gehenna, to the place of everlasting torment, fire, and punishment? Now compare the literal hell with this place Topheth. Is it not ordained of old for the judgment of the wicked? Is it not deep and large, a lake of fire? And consider this prospect: will the breath of God provide the blast that fires the judgment furnaces of hell?

The power of the breath of God has another glorious aspect. The breath of God imparts spiritual life, in addition to physical life. When God breathed into man's nostrils the breath of life, man became a living soul. This soul is spiritual; it is eternal; and no other part of the creation received it.

Following the resurrection, we have the heart-warming account of Christ's appearance to His disciples. "He breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost" (John 20:22). The Greek word translated wind in the Pentecost account is also translated breath in other places (Acts 17:25). The rushing mighty wind was a physical evidence of the power of the breath of God, as it imparted the Holy Ghost to these believers.

"For in him we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Truly our every breath, both physically and spiritually, is a gift from God. Let us take seriously the warning of Daniel to King Belshazzar: "The God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified" (Daniel 5:23).

May our response be as the psalmist's: "Let every thing that hath breath praise the LORD. Praise ye the LORD" (Psalm 150:6).



## **Profitable Midweek Services**

Midweek services were first held in the early 1900s. Midweek Bible readings were designed especially for the youth. Sunday school committees planned the Sunday schools at midweek Christian Worker's meetings. As World War II came to an end, these meetings faded into the background, and the prayer meeting became prominent and still serves the church well today. How can it be kept profitable?

We should recognize its importance. Gathering together at a midweek service can encourage and challenge us to greater faithfulness. The daily routine and cares of life tend to distract our focus from Christ. A set time in the middle of the week helps us to keep God first in our lives. Also, those with whom we associate often have a great influence on us. Through fellowship with God's people, our commitment to Christ and His church is strengthened.

Another very important purpose is to intercede on the behalf of others. Many needs abound around us. Right in our own brotherhood, some may be facing the sunset years of life, sickness, the loss of a loved one, or temptation. "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (James 5:16). Many in the world around us are on the road to destruction. The Lord is "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

We should plan to attend. Our lives are busy and our days full of cares. Planning our week so full that we barely have time to attend will detract from its inspiration, making it burdensome. Allowing ample time to prepare for and attend this time of worship, on the other hand, will enhance the inspiration we receive. To arrive early will avoid distractions and build a worshipful atmosphere.

We should expect to receive. This attitude will open our ears to catch nuggets of truth that God sends through His messengers. The obvious result of allowing these truths to sink deep into our hearts is inspiration!

We should participate. We need to be involved. We should sing out and meditate on the message of the songs, follow along in our Bibles as the Word of God is read, and share in the discussion. We should not dominate it lest we become a burden to others. Most of all, we should be sincere in worship.

The prayer period should be the focus of the meeting. How can it be kept inspirational?

We need to prepare. This will make the time of sharing prayer requests inspirational. Each member should have some needs on his heart that could be shared. We should humbly share needs that we are facing. The moderator should repeat the prayer requests so that all can hear.

We should allow ample time for prayer. Praying is not a race with the clock, but a time of communing with God, our Source of life. The prayers should not be too lengthy so numerous brethren can participate. At times the congregation can be divided into groups so more can contribute. On those occasions the gifts of the younger can be developed.

We need to develop spontaneous and spiritual prayer unless we allow Christ to come into our lives and make us new creatures, prayer will not flow from our hearts. "Ye must be born again" (John 3:7). Prayer must be sincere. Jesus warned against vain repetitions (Matthew 6:7).

We also need a sincere burden for other's needs. "Say not ye, There are yet four months, and then cometh harvest? behold, I say unto you, Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest" (John 4:35). The time is short! Many souls are in danger! God responds to saints who intercede for souls. He is "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

Prayer is the lifeline that connects us to God. Through prayer we gain a love for our brethren and find peace in stressful situations. "Prayer is the Christian's vital breath."

We need to pray audibly. Everyone should be able to hear and participate. We should lift our head above the bench, especially if our voice does not carry well. The rest should pray with the brother who is praying. Remember, this cannot be done if the prayer is muffled behind the bench. The prayer period should be collective communion with God.

We need to be reverent. "The LORD is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him" (Habakkuk 2:20). To look around or whisper distracts ourselves and others from speaking to and hearing God. Such actions communicate that God is not worthy of worship! God forbid. Other distractions such as clanging baby toys and undisciplined children distract from prayer. The Almighty God deserves full attention.

May we worship the Lord "in spirit and in truth."



## **Keys to a Clear Conscience (Part 2)**

### **Confessing Sin**

Sin separates man from God. When Adam and Eve sinned, they attempted to hide from God in shame and fear. But the way to reconciliation with God includes repentance and confession.

Confession is the admission of a self-accusing fact. Confessing sin is acknowledging guilt and admitting one's own vileness and sinfulness. All sin is an offense before God. "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight" (Psalm 51:4). So, all sin must be confessed personally to God. Only God can forgive sins.

Confession should be specific and truthful. A general confession will not clear the conscience. If we have wrong attitudes or hold a grudge, we must confess them, not just the unkind word or deed. "The axe is laid unto the root of the trees" (Luke 3:9). When we are truly sorry, we will be open and honest.

A sincere, genuine confession is from the heart. A deceitful confession to avoid consequences or to impress others is sinful. A sincere person will forsake sin and walk in God's ways. Godly sorrow will also develop a hatred for sin. "For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation" (2 Corinthians 7:10).

A confession is the most effective when it is voluntary. To confess only after one is cornered does not in itself show genuine sorrow for sin.

When sin involves other persons, confession should be made to them. It may seem easier to confess to God than to each other. But when others have been wronged, confession to God is not enough. "Confess your faults one to another" (James 5:16).

"Sins such as fornication, adultery, lawsuits, drunkenness, and persistent worldliness and pleasure seeking shall be confessed publicly" (Rules and Discipline, art. 111, no. 3). This acknowledges the seriousness of the sin and causes others to fear (1 Timothy 5:20).

In order for confession to clear the conscience, sin must be forsaken. "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy" (Proverbs 28:13).

Our conscience should find rest in confession. Some struggle with an oversensitive conscience. We must "[forget] those things which are behind, and [reach] forth unto those things which are before" (Philippians 3:13). To live in fear of saying or doing something slightly inaccurate is not God's will.

Confessing sin brings the blessings of peace and joy. Our relationship with

God is restored and we can enjoy fellowship with Him. We also receive power for victory.

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

—David



### *PRAYER POINT*

*"The effectual fervent prayer  
of a righteous man availeth much"*

*Pray that our affection would be set on things above,  
not on things of this world, which is vanity and vexation of spirit.*

*Pray for those who are suffering afflictions,  
that they might experience the grace of God each day,  
and healing according to His will.*

*Pray for school boards as they seek teachers for the next school term.*

*Pray for our government officials that they would grant us the privilege to  
continue to lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.*

*Pray for multitudes living in unbelief and darkness,  
that they might turn to the Lord before it is too late.*

*Thank God for health and strength to labor with our own hands to provide  
for our own needs and to give to others in need.*

