

The Three-Way Marriage

A Manifesto for Christian Lovers

By Dr. Corey Allan

THIS ESSAY IS FREE TO SHARE - PLEASE, SPREAD THE WORD.

The three-way marriage
By Dr. Corey Allan
Simple Marriage
<http://www.simplemarriage.net>

The information contained in this document is free to share and use. Please spread the word throughout the blogosphere, Internet, Facebook, Twitter, email and face-to-face conversations. Thank you.

That is what marriage really means: helping one another to reach the full status of being persons, responsible and autonomous beings who do not run away from life.

~ Paul Tournier

All of life is growing.

Every living thing grows. It's part of the natural order.

When something is born, hatched, sprouted, spawned, or conceived, it begins a lifelong process of growth.

When you were born you were launched on a journey of growing. A journey filled with ups and downs, aches and pains, joys and sorrows, but growth was a constant.

One of the key mechanisms for our growth is marriage.

In fact, it's THE key mechanism for adults.

As a child, you largely live a paint by numbers life. You are expected to accomplish the next milestone or task all throughout your childhood. There are even websites that offer charts so parents can track how well their child is painting those numbers in.

You can't escape this type of life for children.

Listen to the conversations among parents. It's a litany of what their child has accomplished or achieved. *"Little Billy began sitting up when he was only 5 months*

4

old, that's two months before the chart says he should be able to do that. He's such an advanced child!" Or, "My Sussie learned to read when she was 3."

It's all around us. Life as a child is paint by numbers. Accomplish this task (feeding yourself, reading, potty training, conjugating verbs), achieve this milestone (crawl, walk, run, field dress a deer); all these things must be done before moving on to the next stage of life.

Paint by numbers covers childhood; it even covers the beginning stages of adulthood and the corporate world, but what about the rest of life?

And what about marriage?

The marriage relationship is anything but paint by numbers.

Let's look at how this whole thing unfolds.

Premarital distortions of each other

When you first met your soon to be spouse - an interesting thing happened in each of you to allow the relationship to occur. Whether this meeting was planned or by chance, doesn't matter. As the relationship unfolded and progressed, you were each given the opportunity to meet with the other's marketing department.

You remember what that time was like. You would get together for dates or connect on the phone and spend a majority of the time talking. You talked constantly. About everything. All the while trying to portray the "best" parts of yourself in hopes the other would remain interested.

It is the nature of all dating and pre-married people to be idealistically distorted. It's wish fulfillment, you see what you wish to see in order to protect the feelings you believe your partner has caused.

Actually, at the beginning of a love relationship you both experience a chemically induced high. During the initial stages of this relationship, your brain produces a chemical called phenylethylamine. A naturally occurring chemical found in your brain as well as in other substances, like chocolate. Phenylethylamine, also known as the "love drug," produces feelings of euphoria, alertness, and improves your sense of well being. While you are in the beginning stages of a love relationship, your brain is flooded with this chemical.

6

Phenylethylamine is produced in the emotional center of your brain called the amygdala, and this flooding will last from six months to two years. Which is about the same amount of time it takes many couples to meet, fall in love, get engaged and get married. So after you return home from your honeymoon, or shortly thereafter, the “love drug” has begun wearing off and you’re now faced with being married to a person you may be finally seeing without the rose colored glasses for the first time. This is also why there are many people who’ve woken up one morning a couple of years into the marriage and said to themselves, “Who is this person I’m married to? Where’d the person I was dating and engaged with go?”

Many people long to get back to the feelings they experienced while they were dating. They want to re-flood their brain with another dose of the “love drug.” The problem is, we can’t go backwards in life or our relationships. Instead, we must go forward. Realize that our chemically altered relationship is a thing of the past and work on growing into our relationship of the present and future. Phenylethylamine has run its course and now you can work on increasing your level of the “bonding” chemical known as Oxytocin.

7

Marriage's prototype is found in the Trinity

At the core of each of us is a desire to be accepted, valued, loved. It's hard-wired into us. It's part of our design.

Going back to before anything was in existence, there was a relationship. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have always been around, and they've always been in relationship with each other.

The best way to sum up this relationship?

LOVE.

Scripture even refers to God in this way - God is love. Before anything other than the trinity came about, love existed. And it existed in the Trinity's relationship within itself.

You've got the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit completely and totally in love with each other. Love's very nature is "other" centered. It's altruistic. So within the Trinity you've got the three beings focusing on each other. God is focusing on Christ, Christ is focusing on the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is focusing on God and this has gone on and will go on for eternity.

The Trinity is a love-fest if you will.

A constant outpouring of "I love you."



So what is one of the most loving and caring things an all loving being and relationship can do? Create something else from within this relationship to enjoy this relationship.

Enter Adam.

Man is created in order to experience more of God and the Trinity's relationship within itself. Adam is created and placed in the garden, which presents some issues of its own when it comes to the design of men and women, but that's a story for another book (see John Eldredge's thoughts in *Wild at Heart* and *Captivating*).

Even in paradise, Adam was lonely - a negative emotion we don't often associate with paradise. But Scripture states that Adam was lonely. There was none of his kind to have a relationship with.

Think about that for a moment. Adam's walking around with God - constantly living within the love of the Trinity - yet he's lonely.

So when you have seasons or moments of loneliness, you're not alone in your experience. Everyone who's ever existed has experienced this feeling.

How does God handle Adam's loneliness?

He has Adam look among the animals for a helper suitable for him.

What?

Man is lonely and God has him name the animals? That sucks.

And do you realize how long this process might have taken?

Scholars estimate that this was a 10 to 100 year process.

Day after day of looking for something to ease the pain of loneliness. Day after day of coming up with names for every animal.

And you thought your life had boring and lonely moments?

After this process was done, Scripture says there wasn't a helper suitable for Adam, so God caused a deep sleep in Adam, took a rib and created Eve. After Eve's creation, she is then brought to Adam and how does he react?

I believe his reaction is actually more like a huge sigh. A giant exhale.

In fact, the words he speaks are actually the first instance of poetry in the Bible.

Eve is presented and Adam says, *"This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh."*

What he was searching for all those years was now standing before him. But even more than that, the mere fact that another being of his kind was in existence allowed the two of them to exist in relationship with each other. To experience a degree of the relationship the Trinity modeled.

Naked without any shame

Now that Eve has entered the picture, Adam's loneliness has subsided a bit and all's well in paradise. Right?

Creation is complete. Everything is now in existence and in place. So how does Moses refer to the culmination of God's handiwork?

"The man and his wife were both naked and they felt no shame" (Genesis 2:25).

Interesting.

Creation is now complete and Scripture refers to this completion by pointing out that everyone walked around naked.

As the story progresses, Adam and Eve eat the apple, sin enters the picture and what's the first thing that happens?

They realize they're naked and cover themselves up.

In essence, they hide.

Isn't this odd?

So why would Moses (who's credited with writing down the first books in the Bible) put this in here?

Here you have the Holy Scriptures and Moses is talking about people being naked. Donald Miller refers to this naked free-for-all like this: *Perhaps the writer intends to add this statement for us to giggle. That's the comedic nature of nudity.*

In most of our lives, nudity makes us uncomfortable.

We are the only species on the planet that wears clothes. There's no human culture that walks around completely naked. There are a couple that are close, a tribe in Papua New Guinea and another in Africa both wear a string around their waist. That's it. One string. And if they remove that string in public - they feel shame.

What is it about nudity that makes us uncomfortable?

We spend a great deal of time avoiding being naked.

I don't know about you but I'm acutely aware of the times when I'm naked. I've yet to have a time where I was able to experience what Adam and Eve experienced - being naked without any shame.

What would it take to be naked and truly experience no shame?

Closeness. Trust. Security. Love.

While we will never be able to experience the degree of nakedness without shame that Adam and Eve felt, we can grow into a better comfort level with ourselves, and our nakedness.

Adam and Eve walked with God in the cool of the day.

They had the type of relationship where they were bombarded with “I love you.”

They existed in God’s constant outpouring of love. So this walking with God in the cool of the day would have been bathed in “I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you.”

All day. Every day.

Do you realize that while many of the humanistic philosophies of our world preach that humans are self-determining beings, the Bible teaches something different? **As humans, we gain our identity and our existence from outside ourselves.**

The very nature of man’s being is designed to have something outside itself help it feel better about itself.

This is why it is so easy to get lost in the roles we play in life. Our identities can so easily be wrapped up in what we do, who we’re married to, whose parent or child we are.

God designed us this way, but God designed us to seek Him.

To find our identity through Him.

This idea is magnified with the Fall.

Adam and Eve were living in the cascading love of God. They were showered by the love of the Trinity. I imagine it would feel like being wrapped in a warm blanket on a cold night (only magnified exponentially).

When the Fall happened however, the experience stopped.

Before the Fall it was constant *“I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you.”*

When sin entered the story, it stopped. Perhaps it went something like this:

“I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I lov ...”

Silence.

What do you do when something of this magnitude happens?

You hide. You cover up.

And you seek what is now missing in any way you can find.

Relationships, money, status, sex, accolades, career.

This is the world we now live in. Our world post Fall, where we have within our DNA a distant memory of Eden, but can't get it back.

If we can't recreate Eden here, and we can't go back, what are we to do? Grow up.

The tree of love

I've often wondered what the purpose of the tree in the Garden of Eden was. God tells Adam that he is free to eat of any tree in the garden except one. Why?

Isn't that like painting a park bench then placing a sign on it stating: "Caution, wet paint DO NOT TOUCH."

If you're anything like me, when you see something like this there's an immediate urge to touch.

This is an idea I struggled with for quite a while. Why, if God knows our propensity to do our own thing and follow our own path, would He allow a way out - knowing we would most likely take it?

The answer is simple. **If there wasn't a way out of the relationship, there couldn't be love.**

At the very core of love is the freedom to choose.

Love lets you go.

Love lets you be you.

God had to provide a way out of the relationship for there to *be* a relationship.

Marriage is the same.

I realize we don't like to admit this, but marriage is fragile. Divorce is an option. Your partner could choose to move on to something else. They could choose to spend more time at work than at home with you. They could choose to live through the kids and their activities rather than with you.

They could choose countless other things rather than you.

There is no way you can control your partner and force them to love you. A marriage where one partner seeks to control and change the other partner is simply manipulation, it has nothing to do with love.

Love, on the other hand, is a choice. It's not just a feeling.

Growing up in your relationship is also a choice.

Marriage is designed for our growth

Marriage creates a natural container for growth. No other relationship presents more possibilities for pleasure and pain than marriage. Marriage is not ultimately about happiness, regardless what Hallmark and Hollywood would have you believe.

Marriage is actually a poor choice when it comes to making us happy. Happiness is found within yourself, it doesn't come from another person.

Think about it this way, what drives our desire for happiness, or at least the seeking of happiness, is a chance to overcome our brokenness and emptiness that were magnified in the Fall. We long to have these feelings replaced or eased. When we seek to accomplish this in marriage, we are asking to have another fallen being fill in that gap.

A well-known (and misleading) line from the movie *Jerry McGuire* only furthers this belief - "You complete me."

It's as if another human could cover up or erase the weakness and flaws in your being.

If you have been married any length of time, you know that the opposite of this is actually what happens. Your spouse is often the first person to point out these flaws and weaknesses. Not because they are hate-filled, vindictive life-joy-suckers, but because they live life with you. They can't help but see these parts of you; and you them.

No other human can ever complete another human, period.

So if you can't ultimately find what you're looking for in another human, what are you left to do?

Grow up. Mature. The Bible refers to this idea as becoming wiser.

Happiness can be found along the journey of your growth and maturing. Remember how much joy you experienced as a child? Now compare that to the depth of joy you can experience as an adult. As an adult, the depth is far greater and the experience more rich. The reason for this is because you've grown up.

All right, I get it. I need to grow up, but what exactly does that mean? Glad you asked. Allow me to explain.

Growing up involves balancing two fundamental life forces: *the drive for separateness and the drive for togetherness.*

Separateness propels us to be on our own, to chart our own course in life, and to create our own identity.

Togetherness pushes us to be part of a group, to connect with others, and experience things only relationships can provide.

When these two life forces are expressed in balanced, healthy ways, meaningful relationships are created where both members develop into better people. In

essence, a marriage works more on the people involved than the people involved work on the marriage.

Giving up your separateness in order to be together is as defeating in the long run as giving up your relationship in order to maintain your separateness.

As David Schnarch, author of *Passionate Marriage* states, either way, you end up being less of a person with less of a relationship.

Growing up requires quite a bit of work and is often confused with other ideas, so here's a few important clarifications:

Growing up requires the ability to maintain a solid sense of self when your partner is away or you're not currently in a primary love relationship.

Growing up values contact but doesn't fall apart when you're alone.

Growing up does not involve any lack of feelings or emotions.

Growing up means you can evaluate your emotions (and your partner's) both subjectively and objectively. In other words, you can connect with your partner without fear of being swept up in their emotions. You can have your feelings without them having you because they don't control or define your sense of self.

When people scream "I got to be me!" "I need space!" and "That's just the way I am!" they are not growing up.

In fact, just the opposite. When you are afraid you'll disappear in the relationship you do things in order to avoid your partner's emotional engulfment. This is different than boundary setting, which is an important aspect of growing up. The difference is boundary setting while growing up is done in the context of staying in the relationship (i.e. in close proximity and restricted space). The process of holding onto yourself in the midst of an important relationship is what creates growth.

Growing up means becoming solid but permeable.

When you have solid core beliefs and values, you can adapt and change without losing your identity. You can be influenced by others and adjust to new circumstances as the situations warrant. It is important to realize however, this flexible sense of identity develops slowly over time, requires soul-searching deliberation, and is not simply adapting to the wishes of others.

Your personal development is not selfish.

You can choose to be guided by your partner's best interests, even at the price of your own agenda. This is often the price of committed relationships. Your partner is a separate individual - just like you. You can reach a point where what they want for themselves is as important to you as what you want for yourself.

As you reach higher levels of growth, your view of conflict in relationships will dramatically shift. “What I want for myself versus what I want for you” shifts to “What I want for myself versus my wanting for you what you want for yourself.”

When you feel you need to talk your partner out of what he or she wants in order for you to get your way, you lose.

No matter how you slice it - marriage presents endless opportunities to grow up.

The choice is yours.

How do I know if I'm growing?

A marker for tracking your growth is your increased ability to respond to things in life, not simply react. Emotional reactivity is rampant in our society.

Keep this in mind, emotional reactivity equals emotional immaturity.

An example of the difference between reactivity and responding is seen in First Responders and other Crisis Professions. When a tragedy or a catastrophe occurs, a majority of people run away from the event. They react and run. First responders on the other hand likely experience the same initial reaction, but then training kicks in and they respond. Most often by heading towards the event rather than away from it.

Growing up in marriage is the same. While you are emotionally immature, you react to everything that happens. Something doesn't go your way, you may yell and scream or withdraw and be cold and distant.

In the middle of discussion with your spouse, they may say something you don't like or disagree with and you react by trying to change their mind or change the subject.

Being reactive limits your options, most often to only blaming your spouse or some other external source for your discomfort. Reacting often seeks to place blame for whatever happened. It is a lower form of thinking - also referred to as animal brain. The main purpose for our animal brain is pure survival as this is the part of our brain responsible for our fight or flight response.

Responding, on the other hand, involves a high order of thinking and feeling. It means you take in to account your feelings AND your thoughts - then proceed accordingly.

In psychobabble terms, this is referred to as differentiation, first coined by family systems theorist Murray Bowen, then expanded on by David Schnarch in *Passionate Marriage*.

The general idea is this:

You emerge from your birth family at the highest level of growth your parents achieved. This level is fairly established during your adolescence and can remain at this level for life. Poorly “grown up” parents will pressure their children for more togetherness or more distance as a way to regulate their own emotions. This pressure will in turn stunt the child’s developing their own ability to think, feel, and act for themselves. The child learns how to conduct themselves only in reaction to others.

Growing up is not easy. Growth is best accomplished through concentrated effort (like therapy) or by going through crisis (commonly occurring throughout the course of marriage, family, friendship, and career). In general, though, the level of “growing up” in a family tends to stay relatively the same from one generation to the next. It changes only when a family member is motivated to change him- or herself enough to rewrite their family’s legacy.

The reason why growing up is not easy is it involves change, and change is difficult for everyone. Change requires a great amount of motivation to make it last, and to even begin the process. I'm reminded of the story about two farmers sitting on a porch with the owner's dog between them. The guest notices that the dog whines or moans every so often. Finally, after some time goes by, he asks the owner, "What's wrong with the dog?" The owner says, "He's sitting on a nail." The guest asks, "Why doesn't he move?" The owner says, "I reckon it don't hurt enough yet! When it does, he'll move!"

Upon leaving your family of origin and whatever level of growth you've achieved, you'll pick a marital partner who's at the same level as you. If your partner's not at the same level, the relationship is short lived. Throughout the course of the relationship, partners remain at the same level as each other. There are times when one partner will be a half-step further along in their growth than the other - but it's only a half-step. So the times when you feel so much more "grown up" than your spouse, remember that you're likely only a half-step ahead of them. If you and your spouse argue over who's more grown up, you'll be interested in three important implications:

1. You have about the same level of tolerance for intimacy, although you may express it differently.
2. The reason you and your spouse make such splendid sparring partners is because you are both equal in your level of growing up.
3. When you assume you are emotional equals (even if you want to believe otherwise) you'll begin to see the trade-offs in your relationship.

What about ... And the two shall become one?

I can already hear some of you asking the question, “But the Scriptures say *...and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one.*” Mark 10:8

I believe the two becoming one is in reference to a couple of things. One, it’s a reference to act of sexual intercourse and the connectedness a man and a woman have physically. It’s also an alluding to procreation and two people creating one child. And it can also be interpreted as a spiritual concept and the spiritual union a marriage creates.

Based on Scripture’s overriding idea that God is interested in our character, our maturity and our growth, I don’t believe He designed relationships for us to meld completely into and cease to exist as single entities - thus ceasing to grow.

As stated previously, marriage’s prototype is found in the love within the Trinity. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one, yet three.

When you are in this kind of marriage, you can serve each other and freely give of yourself.

“Yeah, but Scriptures also say we should deny ourselves and serve our spouse. That our spouse should come first.”

The idea of denial of self is found only in reference to our relationship with Christ and our sinful nature, not with each other in marriage.

Marriage and relationships based on love are based on choice - if there is no choice, there is no love. When marriage is viewed this way we can then work to reach a point where we can extend ourselves for the well being of our spouse. And we can do this with no strings attached ... because it's based on love.

When you view marriage through the lens of growth, you realize that *your* growth is all you're responsible for, *and* all you can control.

When you focus on your spouse and their needs or wants and try to satisfy them you're dealing with something beyond your control. It's quite possible there will be times when your spouse's desires, needs, wants, etc. may not be in line with growing up - it may be they want to remain comfortable or continue in their "childish ways." Then what do you do?

At the end of the day, I believe life as a follower of Christ is about maturing and growing in wisdom which is done both in relationship with Him, and with each other. The relationship within the Trinity creates even more love within Trinity (if that's even possible since you're dealing with something that in and of itself is the culmination of love).

Our relationships are designed the same.

So what's next?

Growing up in marriage is difficult at times because it's uncomfortable.

It involves the counter-intuitive move of leaning into conflict and discomfort rather than avoiding it.

But conflict is what helps create a better story for your life and marriage.

It opens to door for you to experience more love, passion, and adventure - and who doesn't want more of this in their life?

Please do me a couple of favors: If this essay has meant anything to you, come over and post a short comment on my site. I'd really appreciate it.

<http://www.simplemarriage.net/threeway.html>

Also, spread word. Share this with your friends, family, co-workers, neighbors, blog readers, and the people you meet on the street. Thank you.