

In~Laws are ALIENS

■ by Melvin Jonkman, MDiv, Executive Director

I don't know what you think about my title; my wife doesn't like it.

To her it comes off as negative. I don't mean for it to be negative, but rather, to state a fact. The online version of Merriam-Webster's Dictionary gives this as the 1a definition of Alien: *belonging or relating to another person, place, or thing: strange*. In-laws, and just for clarification, I'm an In-law too, are strangers to each other. Their habits, customs, beliefs, manners, and worldview may be very different.

Two Become One = In-laws

Two people, who were strangers meet, are attracted to each other, spend time together, fall in love, and marry. Over the course of time, habits change, customs are adjusted, common ground is found in beliefs, expectations about manners produce change, and worldviews are merged. Two become one.



When this happens many strangers are along for the ride. Grandparents, parents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and many others are brought together because two people fell in love and got married. And just like in the dating relationship, things don't always go smoothly. There are bumps and struggles and sometimes painful experiences as the individuals who make up these groups relate to each other.

In-laws Move Slowly

Kathy and I love our son-in-law and daughters-in-law, and I believe that they love us too. We have a relationship with them, but we need to be careful. We need to move slowly. The most important things we can do are love and support our

children's spouses. These are adults who have become part of our family because they love our daughter and our sons. We need to respect them, get to know them, value their uniqueness and encourage them to be themselves when with us.

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Loyalty Shifts to Spouse

One of the first things the Bible says about marriage is "...a man shall **leave** his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh." Before our children are married there should be a strong connection to the parents. After children are married, their loyalty shifts to their spouse. And as parents we need to respect that shift. The new couple needs the freedom to explore, define and grow their relationship without interference. If we raised our children well, we need to trust their training and allow them to apply it in the marriage relationship.

Ingredients for Positive In-Law Relationships

As parents we need to give our children space; however, this does not mean that we don't have a place in their lives. The Bible also tells children that they should "honor" their parents (Exodus 20:12). This doesn't stop when they marry, and it applies to their spouse as well. Children are to show patience, kindness, gentleness, and respect. This applies to in-laws too. Equally important however is this instruction from Colossians 3:21, "Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged." As we relate together, we each have a responsibility to build the relationship, to encourage open communication, to honor differences, and to love each other as God loves us.

Positive in-law relationships are a great blessing. Living in harmony, respecting and supporting each other in our uniqueness helps all of us grow as God intends, for the good of the individual and the family. Troublesome in-law relationships can be a source of deep emotional pain, and it is not what God intends.

If you have a good relationship with your in-laws give thanks. If you are struggling don't give up. If you know where you have contributed to the pain, own it, ask for forgiveness and open up the channel of communication. If you are the one who has been wronged, forgive and open up the channel of communication.

Finally, pray that God will help you love each other and build each other up for his sake and the sake of your family.



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