

## **A Brief Profile of Christian Marriage**

### **The origin of marriage**

Marriage was ordained by God at the outset of human history. The account of its origin is found in Genesis 2:18-25 although there are a number of other passages in the Bible which refer to marriage and sexuality. Marriage is provided by God as the proper channel to contain what one writer described as "the most powerful and moving experience that life has to offer". Five characteristics of marriage which can be identified from the teaching of the Bible are:- (1) It is exclusive involving one specific man and one specific woman (2) It is heterosexual - a man and a woman (3) It is to be publicly acknowledged at some social event (4) It is permanent (Jesus said "what God has joined together let man not separate" (Mark 10:9)) (5) Its consummation is effected by sexual intercourse implied in the expression "...the two will become one flesh".

### **The purpose of marriage**

Due to its divine origin it is appropriate to speak in terms of purpose in relation to marriage. Although there is a sense in which a marriage is what you make it, this must not be extended to include its purpose which is not open to negotiation since its origin is not human. It is probably more true to speak of the *purposes* than of *the* purpose of marriage.

It is to be hoped that marriage will bring great happiness to those who enter it. Alas this is not always so and often no doubt on account of the fact that many people have entered into marriage with the false and dangerous notion that to provide happiness for those who enter it is the principal purpose of marriage. The very wording used in the marriage ceremony itself describing the terms of the commitment would if heeded be a salutary corrective to this false notion. "For better for worse for richer for poorer in sickness and in health to love and to cherish till death do you part" could with equivalent accuracy if less aesthetic appeal be reduced to "in happiness or in sadness". The commitment is primarily to another person not to personal benefits. Most people would not require to promise to derive benefit for themselves, the innate propensity for our own good generally insures that we will seek our own welfare unprompted. At the heart of true marriage is the virtue of unselfishness not self-gratification.

Sometimes it is thought that the principal purpose of marriage is procreation - the producing of children but as it has been observed "the human race . . . could propagate itself quite adequately apart from marriage by mating. . . Human beings would if anything be even more prolific than they are if there were no marriage institution". Also many good marriages for one reason or another are childless but this does not mean for a moment that they are pointless. Nevertheless the producing and raising of children does remain as a purpose of marriage.

Nearer to the heart of the principal purpose of marriage is mutual support of husband and wife each directing consideration towards the other. In support of this is the way the origin of the concept of marriage is depicted in Genesis chapter 2. God's observation is that "it is not good for the man to be alone".

### **Why bother with a wedding?**

The significance of the wedding ceremony is that it fulfils the following two functions. (1) It represents the social recognition of the marriage - a reminder that marriage has implications for the rest of society (2) It reinforces the inward commitment for the couple. It is easier to have a lapse in a promise to another person where it is a purely private

matter than if it has been made public. To put it simply it makes the intended permanence of the relationship a far more serious matter.

### **Marriage and love**

The Bible goes beyond law to the inner dynamics of marital relationships. The Bible recognises love in several ways but it is particularly important to bear in mind that the greatest kind of love there is not the romantic kind. The most profound kind of love is not a feeling (although feelings will be involved) but rather an act of will to seek the good of others. . In Ephesians 5 Paul presented what is widely regarded as the most exalted image of marriage in the Bible "Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church ....the wife must respect her husband" (Eph.5:25,33); "wives be submissive to your husbands.....husbands in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life" (1Pet.3:1,7). For a husband to love his wife (and by implication for a wife to love her husband) "as Christ loves the church" is to love unconditionally.

Even within the Old Testament this dimension of marriage - of a loving relationship can be found notably in the story of Hosea where unconditional love is portrayed within a marriage to a high degree. This is true also of other passages (e.g. Is.54:9,10 and Eccl.9:9). Morality then must extend beyond structure to the qualities of a marriage. A man may be legitimately married but be treating his wife in a manner which is not legitimate. It is important however not to conclude from this that provided the relationship is qualitatively acceptable that it matters not that it conforms to a particular structure. Both are necessary, both are important.

The hot passion of romantic love is recognised also and portrayed in a uniquely vivid way in "Song of Songs" which "if read at face value will make even modern people blush".

### **Marriage and sex**

Sex is fun but fun is not its primary purpose; "we must understand that neither sex nor anything else is made by God simply for our pleasure. Rather we are made so that we might love as God loves, and God makes it pleasurable for us to love sexually." Sex then is a valuable gift from God but it is devalued and diminished if it is abused. Sex is abused when it is separated from marriage where it belongs, as stated in the following quotations from a variety of different sources:-

"When engaged in improperly, sexual intercourse is no longer the positively meaningful beautiful act it is designed to be but becomes instead an expression of self-gratification, adultery, infidelity, or exploitation"

"Sexual intercourse - whether with a prostitute or the man next door - somehow bonds two people in deep personal union . . . This is why it is of the essence of marriage.

"Something changes when a couple engage in sexual intercourse. The act has altered their relationship"

"God intends for us all to enter into relationships as whole people. That is why He says we shouldn't play with sex or live together outside marriage. We inevitably tear away from the "one flesh" relationship and leave pieces of ourselves behind . . . You will never be able to retrieve that part of your affections carelessly squandered in the past.

Sometime you will have to look your partner in the eyes and say, I'm sorry but there's a part of me you will never be able to have"

"Since premarital and extra marital intercourse is sought mostly for pleasure and relaxation of tension as satisfaction of libido, those indulging in it are generally little inclined to make the corresponding sacrifices and accept the responsibilities that go with it . . . a denial of one of the essential purposes of sexuality namely, a personal relationship designed to be permanent and the willingness to accept the office of parenthood."

Clearly the attitudes and expectations of our present society have drifted very far away from these Christian standards but it is the latter standards and not the former which will provide the greatest stability and promote the greatest happiness.

### **A word about divorce**

It is a sad fact of life that not all marriages last. It is important to recognise not only that some are unwilling victims of divorce but that even with those who carry some or all of the blame for a divorce there is forgiveness and the possibility of a new beginning in God's eyes.

It must be said however that regardless of the legitimacy or necessity of divorce in any particular case there is no escaping the fact that divorce **always** involves blame. There is no such thing as a marriage which legitimately runs its course and comes to a blame-free and natural end while both partners are still alive. Marriage is for life and wherever it ends prematurely at least one party is to blame. You cannot have two people committed to a lifelong marriage and also have divorce. At least one party has abandoned or defiled the marriage.

In spite of these grim but unavoidable facts about divorce, and also in spite of the widespread assumption within some branches of the church that divorced people cannot be remarried, it is my own belief that remarriage is legitimate. My approach is based on the belief that marriage although intended to be permanent is not indissoluble. A marriage can be dissolved although it takes more than a legal pronouncement or document to make it so. When the vows of marriage have been broken - by adultery or abuse or neglect a divorce is possible but is not necessarily always the most desirable option. The Christian approach would recommend the willingness to say "sorry" on the one hand and be willing to change your behaviour for the sake of your spouse and the offering of forgiveness on the other hand. Often the key to reconciliation is when one side is willing to yield to the other regardless of blame.

In practice of course often this is not possible and it has to be accepted that whether an unwilling victim or the sole culprit the marriage is dead.

It is hoped that this will never happen and the key to it never happening is in the seriousness with which you take the vows and enter into marriage.

### **The Wedding vows:**

I ..... now take you ..... to be my wife/husband. In the presence of God and before these witnesses I promise to be a loving faithful and loyal husband/wife to you as long as we both shall live.

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