

# Marriage

Statistics show that marriage in the western world is declining. For example, in the UK marriage rates peaked in 1970 and by 2000 there were only 28 marriages/year for every 1000 unmarried men. And the UK divorce rate increased 6 times between 1950 and 2000. So why bother with marriage? Despite its decline, marriage is the bedrock of society and stable relationships. In fact, it is so important that it is the first sociological rule laid down for man (Gen 2.20-25).

We could ask many questions about marriage. What is its origin? What are its objectives? Does it have advantages for individuals and society in general? How would we define marriage - what are the salient points? Why is it sometimes called *holy* matrimony? Does a marriage between two unbelievers have the same significance and potential as a marriage between two Christians? In other words, is God needed in marriage?

The following attempts to answer these questions from a biblical standpoint.

## 1. Marriage is 'Oneness'

It is highly significant that Genesis states how woman was created. She was formed from one of man's ribs (symbolically or otherwise, we are not told), implying an intrinsic unity between the two sexes. The two are really from 'one flesh', and God intends this unity to be re-established between individuals. One of the central themes in the first marriage (which took place in Eden) was that the two should become 'one flesh':

*'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.'* (Gen 2.24)

Jesus underscored this: 'they are no longer two, but one flesh' (Mat 19.6). God ensures this 'oneness' is placed within a special context in order to identify it, protect it and strengthen it. Genesis 2.24 makes it clear that, at 'oneness', the woman takes the special role of 'wife' (and the man the role of 'husband'). Today we call this context 'the institution of marriage'. So,

- *Marriage mystically symbolises the intrinsic 'oneness' between male and female (Gen 2.21,22)*

What does this mean in the ideal sense? Since man has a triune nature (being a reflection or image of a triune God) then oneness implies a bonding in body, mind and spirit (see 1 Thes 5.23). So besides oneness in sexual union, it is ideally also one in thinking, purpose and worship of God. Put simply, the husband and wife should not pull in different directions, and this is clearly helped by both partners having a common worldview e.g. both could be Christian. It is also important to note that marriage is not God's 'bolt on' to patch up a sick society! God instituted marriage within a *perfect* world, before 'The Fall' (Gen 2.24).

## 2. More Attributes of Marriage

In Gen 2.24 God states that this move to oneness is public - the man deliberately and unambiguously leaves his father and mother. It is a public declaration by both parties that they are committed to each other not only legally but also morally and in terms of companionship. They dedicate the 'oneness' to be between themselves and no other. So,

- Marriage is a public, legal and moral commitment between the man and woman. This gives stability and assurance for both partners

It is important to emphasise the moral aspect of marriage. In Matthew 15.19 Jesus refers to the evil thoughts of the heart and specifically mentions fornication (sexual intercourse outside marriage). Paul underscores this by saying ‘it is better to marry than to burn with passion’ (1 Cor 7.9). The clear injunction is that, to avoid immorality, sexual intercourse should be within the context of marriage (1 Cor 7.2). Within this context, man and woman are to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 1.28). So,

- Marriage sets the boundaries for sexual activity within society; it sets moral boundaries
- Marriage is the proper context in which to bring up children

The good news here is that over 70% of dependent children in the UK still live with married couples. Other important attributes of marriage are:

- Marriage is for human companionship and mutual help (Gen 2.18-20)(1 Cor 11.9)
- Marriage is ideally for life (Mat 5.31,32)(Mk 10.9)

As many will testify, companionship and mutual help seems to become more important in the later years of life. But many find Jesus' teaching on divorce hard to swallow and today some 45-50% of US marriages part. Yes, divorce was permitted in OT times (Mat 5.31), but, nevertheless, God's *ideal* way is for husband and wife to stay together. Today, a temptation is not to work at it due to easier divorce. This is particularly important in the later years of marriage. Finally, marriage is not God's ‘bolt on’ to patch up a sick society. God instituted marriage within a perfect world, before ‘The Fall’ (Gen 2.24). And God's ideal is that it is permanent (Mk 10.9).

### 3. What is ‘Holy’ Matrimony?

In the Bible we read:

‘What therefore God has joined together let no man separate.’ (Mat 19.6)

Does this mean that God is actively involved and acknowledged within every marriage? Is every marriage 'holy' in a sanctified sense? Clearly, no, since many opt to omit any reference to God in their marriage vows. Atheists marry and would not regard their marriage as 'holy' in the biblical sense. Reading both Gen 2 and Mat 19 in context gives a different viewpoint. Both texts stress the fundamental components of marriage:

God created both male and female, and  
They are to be made one flesh

God intends two people of the opposite sex to be joined just as though they are one person. As discussed, this concept has fundamental benefits, even if God is not acknowledged. It is simply God's good plan for man and woman, and it is in this sense that ‘God joins them

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together'. So we refer to 'holy matrimony' not because the man and woman acknowledge God (often they don't), but simply because they are following God's plan for a man and a woman. And, clearly, from a biblical perspective, a same-sex (civil) partnership cannot be termed 'marriage' since it omits the male-female concept.

#### **4. So Is God Needed Within Marriage?**

It is clear that sections 1 and 2 above apply generally across society. Nowhere is a commitment to God implied or required, and so we conclude that marriage is equally applicable to believers and non-believers. Jesus said that people would be 'marrying and giving in marriage' right up to the end of this age and He cannot just be referring to believers (Mat 24.37-39). So is there any difference between a Christian marriage and a marriage between two unbelievers?

Marriage is an institution and like all institutions it needs guidelines! Where do unbelievers look for such guidelines? The Christian marriage is blessed in that it can look to the Bible. Let's look at what the Bible says about 'headship'; God (the Father) is the head of Christ, Christ is the head of every man (and the church), and man is the head of a woman (1 Cor 11.3)(Eph 5.23). The same man-woman relationship is found in Gen 3.16. But this is not a servant-slave relationship; rather, it is one of leadership coupled with selflessness. Christ leads the church, but also gave Himself for her in the ultimate act of love (Eph 5.23). Likewise, man is instructed to lead the woman in a loving, selfless way - Christ's relationship to man is man's ultimate model for marriage. Note that headship also involves responsibility and accountability. At the end of the day, the man carries ultimate responsibility for major decisions within the marriage.

A marriage with God at the centre is potentially stronger than one that hasn't; 'a three-fold cord is not easily broken' (Eccl 4.12). When problems arise, believers can take them to the Lord in prayer. More importantly, God can use a God-centred marriage for His Kingdom, with consequent blessings for that marriage. Even just one believer in a marriage brings blessings to the marriage (1 Cor 7.14). Do the statistics bear this out? Yes and no. The Barna study group have published various reports which conclude there is little difference between the divorce rate for Christians and that of the general population. But some have challenged this and claim that the true picture is that the divorce rate between active born-again Christians is 32% compared to 48% for non-Christians. The bottom line is that human failing, even in Christian marriage, cannot hide transcendent truth, namely, that marriage was instituted by God for man's benefit!

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