

THE SACRED ACT OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

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Let's Begin

The witty newspaper columnist Erma Bombeck once wrote, "There are no guarantees in marriage. If that's what you're looking for, go live with a Sears battery." While Bombeck was unfortunately correct in her humorous conclusion concerning guarantees in marriage, the Scripture offers a much more positive outlook for successful relationships. Indeed the Apostle Paul devotes an entire chapter to the subject.

A more colorful (and Biblically accurate) bit of advice is given by a third-grader named "Britney." Citizen, a Focus on the Family magazine, reported her advice when asked about what makes for successful marriages: "My advice is to say you love each other for the rest of your lives. Don't get a divorce." The Apostle Paul agrees with Britney, not Bombeck!

As we make our way through chapter 7, let's use the simple outline below:

- I. The Monogamy of Christian Marriage (vv. 1-2)**
- II. The Harmony of Christian Marriage (vv. 3-16)**
- III. The Permanency of Christian Marriage (vv. 16-40)**

I. The Monogamy of Christian Marriage (vv. 1-2)

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he undoubtedly was responding to a letter they had written to him (v. 1). We often fail to remember this two-way dialogue taking place. In the letter, they inquired about certain difficulties they were experiencing. One such difficulty was the nature of marriage, singleness, and the imminent coming of our Lord.

Paul's response included principles for the married and unmarried. However, he did not intend to be exhaustive in scope. What he insisted on them seeing was— one may live for Jesus no matter the marital status one finds himself or herself in. He writes, "Brethren, let every man, wherein he is called, therein abide with God" (1 Cor. 7:24).

The first principle Paul explains pertains to the principle of *oneness*. By *oneness* we mean monogamy—*one man for one woman*. He writes, "Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband" (1 Cor. 7:1-2). Jesus instructed us that monogamy was God's original intention (Mt. 19:8). Two reasons are revealed which explain the necessity of monogamy.

First, monogamy is required for the sanctity of the marriage relationship. Paul not only makes this clear in verse 1, in expounding on the virtues of virginity (v. 25), he further states, "But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned. Nevertheless such shall have trouble in the flesh; but I spare you" (v. 28).

Since marriage is ordained by the Lord, marriage between a godly man and woman is surely not wrong—if the marriage is *in the Lord* (v. 39). Hence, celibacy makes one no more spiritual than one married nor does marriage make one less spiritual. Throughout both Old and New Testaments, Scripture makes clear marriage is considered a good thing (cp. Heb. 13:4).

Second, monogamy is required for the purity of the marriage relationship (v. 2). In order to "avoid fornication" Paul implores the Corinthians



Reflection Connection

If marriage is designed to be monogamous, why did God allow Abraham, David, Solomon, and a host of others to practice polygamy? Explain.

to consider the purity marriage secures. In other words, a very real basis for marriage is to avoid sin! Sin is obviously not the only reason or even the chief reason but Paul makes it clear moral purity stands at the forefront of Christian wedlock.

In addition, there are at least three other reasons Scripture gives for the purity of marriage. For instance, God institutes marriage for *companionship*. When God first brought Eve into Adam's life, she was promised to him as a "help-meet" (Gen. 2:18, 20). The Hebrew word for "help-meet" is *ēzer*, occurring 21 times in the Old Testament, only two times of which are translated (KJV) as "help-meet." "Helper" is not a demeaning term, being often used in Scripture to describe God Himself (e.g., Ps. 33:20; 70:5; 115:9). What must not be missed is, the one who is to "help" Adam is to be both companion for him and comparable to him (cp. Gen. 2:20).

God institutes marriage for companionship.

Second, God institutes marriage for having *children*. The Genesis narrative makes clear humankind's purpose is to "replenish the earth" (Gen. 1:28). Indeed God counts many children a blessing He gives. The Psalmist wrote what many feel is rank social heresy today, "As arrows *are* in the hand of a mighty man; so *are* children of the youth. Happy *is* the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate" (Ps. 127:4-5).

Third, God instituted marriage for *control*. Undoubtedly, heaven sanctioned marital bonds as a strategy to control the powerful human resource—sex! (v. 2). If human sexuality is not controlled, there is no end to the destruction it brings. God condemns fornication but commends marriage.

II. The Harmony of Christian Marriage (vv. 3-16)

Not only by oneness do we refer to monogamy —*one man for one woman*—but oneness also implies *harmony*. Marriage is a partnership; and a partnership is meant to be a duet not a duel! Again, when Scripture uses the term "help-meet" a clear complementary role is implied. We should note that complementary roles imply neither inequality in creation nor inferiority in character. Harmony is a non-negotiable element in Christian matrimony.

And, just how is harmony worked out in the marriage relationship? First, there is *physical* harmony. Hear well the Apostle's words: "Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband. The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife. Defraud ye not one the other, except *it be* with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency" (1 Cor. 7:3-5).

Paul speaks of physical harmony in terms of "due benevolence." The term translated "due" is the Greek term *opheilō*, which means "to owe." It was primarily used in the first century, for example, of money that was owed to a lender. There



is a strong sense of obligation involved. When Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He used the term, imploring us to forgive those “indebted” to us (Luke 11:4).

Furthermore, “benevolence” comes from another Greek word that means “goodwill.” Paul insisted marital vows place a man and woman in a position where they belong to one another, obligating them as debtors to each other. Both husband and wife are entitled to loving affection from their spouse.

Second, there is *psychological* harmony. Once more, hear Paul, “And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from *her* husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to *her* husband: and let not the husband put away *his* wife” (1 Cor. 7:10-11). The key term here is “reconciled” (the Greek word, *katallassō*) properly denoting “to change, exchange” something. Hence, Paul is suggesting wife and husband to change from enmity to friendship. Or, in other words, to “reconcile.”

Paul could not have been more relevant to our practical needs. Some couples have physical harmony well enough. However, physical harmony is fundamentally easy compared to psychological harmony.

Two very distinct personalities pulling themselves into a oneness is an act many couples fail to accomplish. Indeed truly successful marriages would be impossible without God’s grace assisting them throughout life.

Reconciliation must always be the goal in human relationships, especially marital relationships. The Apostle Peter notes, “Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with *them* according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered” (1 Peter 3:7). Husbands are to dwell with their wives “according to knowledge,” an essential element to building harmony in marriage.

Third, there is *spiritual* harmony. God’s ideal is for both husband and wife to enjoy eternal life together. However, there are times when it is apparent one’s spouse is unsaved. Paul writes, “But to the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy. But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace. For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save *thy* husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save *thy* wife?” (1 Cor. 7:12-16).

The Bible presents an unequivocal principle concerning spiritually mixed marriages—*Christians must marry Christians* (cp. v. 39). Marriage is the most intimate relationship in the world. How could a Christian share it with a non-Christian? What spiritual edification could result from a believer marrying an unbeliever?

God’s ideal is for both husband and wife to enjoy eternal life together.

Reflection Connection

Do you connect deeply with your spouse beyond the physical and even psychological dimensions in your relationship? Why or why not? What could you do to improve the spiritual harmony in connecting with your spouse? Take care to share in these areas with heightened sensitivity.



Nevertheless, there are times when one is faced with less than God's ideal. What should be done when a believer is wed to an unbeliever? Paul lays out three steps to take.

The first step is for the saved mate to sanctify the home. That is Paul's meaning when he said an unbelieving husband or wife is "sanctified" by the believer, resulting in their home becoming "holy" (v. 14). Jesus can get into a home through the one who believes! The believing wife or husband is heaven's way of getting the Gospel spoken to the unbelieving mate.

The second step is for the saved mate to pacify the home. Recall Paul as he insists "God hath called us to peace" (v. 15). The believer's life is a stabilizing force for the unbeliever. In addition, peace is brought to your children through the believer's relationship with the Lord.

The third step is for the saved mate to unify the home. Expect miracles! Untold millions have won their unbelieving spouses to the Lord through the years. Peter wrote concerning this, "Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives..." (1 Peter 3:1). If wives may win their husbands with their lives, surely husbands may do likewise.

III. The Permanency of Christian Marriage (vv. 16-40)

Paul takes a detour before coming back to the principles of Christian marriage. He first speaks of the freedom we have in Christ as believers (vv. 17-23). Since Christians are "bought with a price" (v. 23), we are servants of the Most High. However, unlike the slaves on the market from which we were purchased, we are the Lord's free men!

Next, Paul speaks to singles (vv. 25-52). Clearly the Apostle thought highly of the single state—"it is good for a man so to be" (v. 26). Hence, believers who choose to be single should never view themselves as either incomplete or insufficient to do the Lord's work. Being single is a gift from God and it should be so considered. Paul's greatest concern for singles or married couples was that they "attend upon the Lord without distraction" (v. 35). By that, Paul simply meant Jesus must remain Lord in every sphere of life, married, single, or widowed.

Finally, Paul gets to the third principle of marriage, which is *permanency*. Marriage is for keeps; marriage is meant to be for life. Paul writes, "The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord. But she is happier if she so abide, after my judgment: and I think also that I have the Spirit of God." (1 Cor. 7:39-40). The phrase so often found in marital vows which says, "till death do us part", reflects perfectly the Biblical record concerning marriage. Marriage is a lifetime contract.

Unfortunately, too often marriage is looked upon as buying a car: when the old one stops running, trade it in! This is precisely the spirit Paul was arguing against. One man for one woman for life is a Judeo-Christian principle written into the constitutional framework of our free society. It is the basis of our social construct for family. Little hope remains for our society if it accommodates a

Reflection Connection

Do you think Christians take seriously the principle of marital permanency? Explain. Does your church have marriage enrichment ministries to promote healthy Christian marriages? Perhaps your Pastor could share a few minutes during this time.



secular culture's push for a redefinition of marriage. Men "married" to men or multiple marriage partners unravels the social fabric so severely, our culture will collapse in on itself if these changes take place.

In addition, Paul makes it clear Christians are only to marry "in the Lord" (v. 39). One asks for a lifetime of wreckage and difficulty when someone who isn't living in submission to the King of Kings is wed to one who is.

Golden Greek Nugget

Paul writes in verse 11 to "let not the husband put away *his* wife." The term translated "put away" is the Greek term *aphiemi*, which means "to send forth," "to send away" or "to let go from one's self." Hence, Jesus dismissed the multitudes, "sending" them on their way (Mt. 13:36). Even more, Christ "yielded" up His spirit on the cross (Mt. 27:50). Or, as the KJV translates, "he gave up the spirit." Given the circumstances Paul delineates, the husband is not to "give up" his wife.

Wrap Up

Shocking statistics demonstrate the odd fact that Christian marriages fail at approximately the same rate as non-Christian marriages do. How can this be true? Believers have the Holy Spirit to empower them and the Word of God to guide them. Hence, their marriages should surely outshine the world's marriages. Monogamous marriages—Christian marriages—are built on harmony that touches the couple physically, psychologically, and spiritually. Indeed the only way for marital permanency to remain a reality is for Biblical harmony to drive the marriage relationship.

