

THE CHRISTIAN CONCEPT OF MARRIAGE

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ABSTRACT

Christian marriage is a relationship between two matured adults. It is an opportunity for those who are already matured to co-exist. It is a monogamous relationship with a spiritual dimension. Couples are expected to exercise maximum prudence, magnanimity, fairness, fortitude and abiding faith in their daily relationship. The purpose of this paper is to define the concept of Christian marriage from the perspective of the New Testament.

KEYWORDS: Christian marriage, monogamy, love, divorce.

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is an arrangement and agreement between two adults of opposite sex to live together in a sexual relationship with approval of their social group. Marriage is a permanent contract which requires voluntary and matured consent. There must be no element of duress. There must be mutual loyalty, parity of dignity and disparity of authority. Couples should work hard to achieve unity and consensus. Christian marriage is not a servant-master relationship. The wife is not a slave and should neither be seen as a burden to the man.

Marital love should be reciprocal. While the Bible enjoins the wife to honour and respect the husband, the latter is expected to love, provide and protect the wife. The woman is neither a house-attendant, nor a tenant to be expelled on flimsy excuses rooted on human failure and shortcomings. The marriage bond is permanent, hence indissoluble, except on account of death. Catholic priest and theologian, Jon Nilson has said:

... the Christian marital ideals of fidelity and indissolubility are not simply residues to be set aside when cultural changes seem to demand it ... Indissolubility means that the mutual commitment is to endure until the death of one of the partners. These ideals are essential to Christian marriage if it is to be a valid sign of the radical depth of the Christian embrace of the particular... When two Christians commit themselves to one another exclusively and indissolubly, they represent the incarnation as the divine offer of salvation in its utter particularity (408- 409).

THE DIVINE ORIGIN OF MARRIAGE

Historically, God established marriage before all other human institutions (O' Donovan 277). Marriage is the foundation of human society. Marriage was established before man's fall into sin. Through marriage we have the family; one of the most vital and indispensable social institutions. Commenting on the historical relevance of the family, *The World Book Encyclopaedia* says: "Family is the oldest human institution. In many ways, it is the most important. It is society's most basic unit. Entire civilizations have survived or disappeared, depending on whether family life was strong or weak" (qtd. in *Making Your Family Life Happy* 6).

Since marriage was ordained of God, couples should do everything possible to accord God a befitting place of honour in their homes and marital relationship, Marriage is God's idea, not man's. It is according to John Stott: "instituted by God himself in the time of man's innocence; it was adorned and beautified by Christ's presence when he attended the wedding at Cana; and it symbolizes the mystical union between Christ and his church" (258).

THE PURPOSE OF MARRIAGE

Marriage is the highest and most intimate relationship that exists on earth. Marriage was instituted for man's happiness. "And Adam said, this now is the bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man" (Genesis 2: 23). The Hebrew equivalent for woman is *ishshah*, which mean, "to be soft". A woman's appearance, manner and actions should be charming (Andelin 23). A woman is not supposed to be hard, tough, or confrontational; but tender, emotionally flexible and totally dependent on the husband for protection. It is the duty of couples to make each other happy. Another purpose of marriage is the continuity and perpetuation of human race (Genesis 1:28). It is only in marriage that sexual intercourse is permissible (I Corinthians 7:2, 9).

MARRIAGE AS A CURE FOR LONELINESS

"It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him" (Genesis 2: 18). It is possible for all of us to visualize the picture of Adam at the Garden of Eden. Adam had the fellowship of God and the company of birds and other animals, but no human partner. Although Adam did not complain, God knew it was a problem. Wheat and Perkins in explaining this view stressed that: "Marriage always begins with a need that has been there from the dawn time, a need for companionship... marriage was designed to relieve the fundamental loneliness that every human experience" (31).

Since human life is an adventure in conflict, the purpose of marriage is to help man cope with the stark realities of human existence. Marriage is a God-given solution for loneliness, anxiety, depression and related neuro-psychological disorders. *The Book of Common Prayer*, published as far back as 1662, gave three reasons for the institution of Christian marriage: "It was ordained for the procreation of children...It was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication... It was ordained for the mutual society, help and comfort that the one ought to have of the other" (363).

No matter the gravity of the problem that is confronting the family, husband and wife should support and cherish one another. In difficult times, couple should sit together and reflect on the good old days. This will bring about healing memories that can help them chart a new course in life. It is true that no condition is permanent. "For riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle toward heaven" (Proverbs 23: 5).

It is common in modern society to see a woman calling for divorce in difficult moments of marriage. Christians are not to panic in evil days; rather they should draw closer to their partner for strength and encouragement. Esther Sullivan has said, "The highest form of courage is being happy under testing" (Lingerman 23). Challenges in life build spiritual muscle.

MARRIAGE AS A REFUGE FOR EMOTIONAL INTIMACY

It is advisable that couples should always have time for themselves. A time to stay together exclusively without any distraction. A time to relax and plan one with another. Marriage requires loveable interaction. This is a workable therapy against stress and depression. Some people stay for a long time without laughing. Hal Linger has said that:

"Laughter relieves the heavy moments; it breaks up too much seriousness and self-importance" (10).

We recommend to couples that laughter is capable of replacing focus. When you are in a stressful situation that is the time to get closer to your partner. Laughing releases tensions. It can break up tightness and rigidity. Spiritually and psychologically, the sound of your laughter is an outward evidence of inner freedom and expansion. Tolkien as cited in Lingerian avers that: "Laughter is the pure sound of merriment... It is the echo of all joys you have ever known. As a sweet rain will pass down a wind spring, and the sun will shine out the clearer, your fears will cease and your laughter well up" (191).

MARRIAGE AS A LIFE -SUPPORT-SYSTEM

Marriage cannot succeed without obedience and mutual trust. Humanly, obedience is only possible when there is love. It is unlikely that we can be loyal to our enemies. Marriage requires supportive loyalty. Wheat and Perkins advocate that: "Each partner should be to the other a haven of refuge from the harshness of the outside world. We all need our hurts soothed; we all need sympathy and empathy from the one closest to us. Love should mean a shoulder to cry on" (101, 102).

Michael Cole opines that marital relationship should create a sense of belonging and mutual dependence. The woman should feel secured at the presence of the husband (221). The husband should be capable of defending and protecting the wife at all times. Feminine dependency, as a quality to be found in a Christian woman, is a picture of helplessness, weakness and submissiveness: "The most pleasant sensation a real man can experience is

his consciousness of the power to give his manly care and protection. Rob him of his sensation of superior strength and ability and you rob him of his manliness" (Andelin 157).

LOVE AS A PRINCIPLE IN CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

"Love can be known only from the actions it prompts. God's love is seen in the gift of His Son..." (Vine 703). Love must be demonstrated in practical terms (John 3: 16, Roman 8: 39). Love in Christian marriage must be active, unconditional and self-giving. Love is concerned more with doing than feelings. The biblical mandate "Husbands, love your wives" (Ephesians 5: 25), may be interpreted "Husbands, be loving to your wives". Love in Christian marriage requires the sacrifice of giving.

Husbands are called to "give themselves" to their wives. (Sproul 51). Sproul further explains: "God's love is love in action, a love that works in concrete deeds... The love of God is not aloof... Love which is passive only, is a dead love, indeed no love at all but a mere indulgence in warm feelings. Love is not born until the passive becomes active" (51, 52). Love has to be provoked through good works. Husbands are not only called upon to sacrifice themselves for their wives, but are also to care for their spiritual welfare (Christenson 126).

FIVE WAYS OF DESCRIBING LOVE IN GREEK

W. E. Vine explains that the Greek language has several words to define different kinds of love (701- 704). The first according to Vine is *epithumia*, which means a strong desire of any kind, either for good, or sometimes for bad. In describing *epithumia*, Wheat and Perkins say: "It means to set the heart on; long for, rightfully or otherwise; or it can mean to covet. When used in the Bible in a negative way, it is translated lust. When used in a positive way, it is translated desire, and this is the meaning we refer to" (58).

If marriage must succeed, husband and wife must have strong physical desire for each other. Couples should do everything to satisfy the physical desire of their partners. Physical desire could be a strong sexual drive, educational ambition, appetite for a choice food and desire for companionship. When a woman feels lonely and desire the company of the husband, it should be granted. *The Alternative Service Book* has stated the purpose of marriage thus:

Marriage is given, that husband and wife may comfort and help each other, living faithfully together in need and in plenty, in sorrow and in joy. It is given, that with delight and tenderness they may know each other in love, and, through the joy of their bodily union, may strengthen the union of their hearts... It is given, that they may have children and be blessed in caring for them and bringing them up in accordance with God's will, to his praise and glory (288).

At the very beginning of creation, God knew that it was not good for a man to be alone. Woman was created purposefully to fill a major gap in the life of a man. The second Greek word used for love is *eros*, love between a man and a woman. It carries the idea of romance. R. C. Sprout describes this love thus: "*Eros* is not always sensual, but it includes the idea of yearning to unite with and the desire to possess the beloved. *Eros* is romantic, passionate, and sentimental. It is often the starting point for marriage" (59).

Eros has been described as rapturable and exquisite pleasure, which is strong, sweet, and all absorbing. *Eros* is transient, that is short-live, because it is changeable and cannot last a lifetime by itself. That is the difference between marriage or love founded on emotional and fleshly response to false and momentary impressions, mere external and marriage which is rooted on reality. The next Greek word according to Mary Swope (168-169) is *storge*. It has

to do with family affection. It has to do with natural affection and a sense of belonging to each other. It is the love shared by parents and children, or brothers and sisters. Sprout opines that: "When the world shows itself as a cold, hard place, *storge* offers emotional refuge. The marriage lacking this quality of love is-like a house without a roof, where the rains can pour in" (60).

Phileo is the deepest kind of devotion that exists between persons and their closest and dearest friend. *Phileo* is a love of relationship, comradeship, sharing, communications, and friendship. *Phileo* creates the most ending fraternal relationship. It is in *phileo* that friends "share each other's thoughts, feelings, attitude, plans and dreams the most intimate things they would share with no one else. They also share time and interests" (Sprout 60).

Agape described the love, which is sacrificial, unconditional and selfless. It was *agape* that brought Jesus into this world to die for sinners. Vine has said that *agape*: "Expresses the deep and constant love and interest of a perfect being towards entirely unworthy objects, producing and fostering a reverential love in them towards the giver, and a practical love towards those who are partakers of the same, and a desire to help others to seek the giver" (703). For William Barclay: "The real meaning of *agape* is unconquerable benevolence, invisible goodwill. If we regard a person with *agape*, it means that nothing that person can or will ever do will make us seek anything but his highest good" (164, 165).

Barclay stated further that *agape* has to do with the will, more than emotions. It is the power to love people we don't like. It is the courage to do good to a person who is unlovable, hostile and even ungrateful to us. *Agape*, does not have enemies. *Agape* is an unmerited favour. St. Paul has taught ... We who are strong must be patient with the weaknesses of the weak..." (Romans 15:1). In an unfortunate and undesirable situation where a married woman

is unable to fulfil her domestic obligation such as keeping the home neat, cooking and other related duties to the husband and the children, the love of God in Christ Jesus does not permit the husbands to opt for divorce. It is also wrong and unscriptural for husband to disclose such a shameful problem to other people. Christian love does not permit us to do anything that will bring shame and disgrace to our partners.

PATIENCE AND ENDURANCE IN MARRIAGE

Long-suffering is a divine quality. The promise of God is wonderfully seen in His tolerating innumerable injuries from men. Even so, we must condone and tolerate "nonsense and foolish" actions in marriage. Couples should not envy one another. Envy is a spirit of dissatisfaction with, and opposition to, the prosperity and happiness of others. Married people should avoid the use of bitter and painful words on their partners. Human memory is so strong, that some bad words may not be forgotten for life. Since no human being is perfect, it is reasonable for couples to own up shortcomings of one another. Love passes over in silence, and keeps confidential things that are displeasing.

The fact that you know the family and moral background of your partner does not give you any right to disgrace him or her. For instance, if you know your wife was a prostitute, or had committed abortion before marriage, it is wrong to either tell a third party, or abuse her with it. Marriage is not for boys and girls, but for matured people.

UNITY IN MARRIAGE

The most important dimension of unity in Christian marriage is the physical relationship of sexual oneness. It is only in marital relationship that a man and woman can stand naked and unashamed (Genesis 2: 25). Sexual oneness means that couples do not see themselves

as distinct persons but as one. There is also mental and emotional unity. This is achieved through harmonious living and agreement. Mental and emotional unity requires common values, common goals, and common interest in life.

Every human being will want to be seen as being useful, wanted, loved and appreciated by someone. It is through mental and emotional unity that people's need for companionship, acceptance, and value as human beings are met. O'Donovan explains that: "In order to grow in mental and emotional oneness, the husband and wife must take time to talk to each other and to share things with each other. They must take time to do things together and to care for one another's needs" (280).

There is a serious need for couples to take vacation alone. Your husband or wife should be your best friend. Gigi Tchividjian (Billy Graham's daughter) has said: "the greatest gift my husband has given me after his love and total commitment, has been his gift of time" (71, 72). No matter the level of commitment, couples should create time to stay alone. You have to relax some tensions and stress through funs and laughter. Your best playmate is your partner.

Some men play with their wives only when they want to have sex with them. O'Donovan has said that: "A wife does not desire to have sex with her husband when he does not show interest in her as a person (280). Another dimension of marital oneness is spiritual unity. Spiritual unity is achieved when couples read the Bible and pray together. "The family that prays together stays together". It is through spiritual oneness that couples are able to raise godly children (Deuteronomy 6: 6-7). God seeks godly offspring (Malachi 2:15). Spiritual unity is an avenue for blessing and peace, which comes when Jesus is the centre of the home.

CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE: MONOGAMY OR POLYGAMY?

One may ask where can unity be visible? Is it in a polygamous or monogamous marriage? Polygamy (literally polygyny) is a very important institution within the African social system. There are strong cultural arguments in support of polygamy in Africa. Some of the presupposition upon which polygamy rest in African society includes:

1. Marrying many women is a cherished symbol of power, wealth and influence in traditional Africa.
2. Africans are always eager to perpetuate their family name into many generations.
3. Having many children and grandchildren is an assurance that one will be remembered and honoured long after death. In Agrarian societies, having many children is an advantage for cheap labour and a sign of strength.
5. Those that have many daughters are hopeful of economic empowerment through the bride-price during traditional marriage. A large family with many wives and children is a source of strength and confidence to family members.

Though these presuppositions may be reasonable, yet it does not guarantee unity in marriage. This is because there is no way one man with two or more women can live in peace in modern society.

Monogamy on the other hand is the accepted and recognized marriage among Christians. In the creation story, God made one wife for Adam showing that God's plan is for one man to have one wife. Monogamy has so many advantages for Christian couples. It affords the one wife adequate care, provision and protection. There is a feeling of security, stability and confidence for the wife and children. O'Donovan avers that: "A woman needs to know that she is the only woman her husband truly loves. A woman's emotional needs cannot be properly met in a polygamous home. When a man has more than one wife, there will

always be jealousy and resentment between his wives" (279). Children born in polygamous homes most times, live in hostility, opposition and hatred.

INTIMACY AND AFFECTION IN MARRIAGE

Marriage requires much intimacy, genuine affection and sacrificial love to succeed. Since the man and the woman are from different parental background, and at times, different cultural backgrounds, there is need for quick adaptation, establishment of enduring intimacy, affection and love. Intimacy refers to warm friendship or understanding. From the Latin *intimus*, meaning "in most", intimacy is: "The state of being most private and most personal in relationship. It depicts a special quality of emotional closeness between two in which both are constantly alert and responsive to fluctuations of feeling and to the well being of the other" (Wheat and Perkins 132).

It requires time, patience and conscious effort to achieve intimacy. Helen Kaplan views intimacy as an important ingredient in the quality of love. It is a means to happiness and emotional stability. Life is more enjoyable, richer and more colourful when shared with an intimate partner. "An intimate relationship acts as a buffer, providing shelter from pressures and tensions of daily life; without intimate relationship, we tend to get lonely and become depressed" (Kaplan 183).

Absence of intimacy in marital relationship will lead to dullness and boredom. William Appleton is of the opinion that "People are now less willing to tolerate boredom... they want fulfilling marriage, high-quality leisure time, exciting sex, warm intimacy, stimulating conversation, good looking bright spouses 24 hours a day ...(73, 81). A young man once said with feeling of despair "my wife and I have already lost touch with each other". This could be corrected through the spirit of forgiveness, genuine love and intimacy.

Intimacy therefore could be viewed as shared feelings, closeness without inhibitions, absence of psychological defence, open communication and honest dealings, agreement on major issues, spiritual harmony, imparted secrets, mutual confidence, sense of warmth, safety and relaxation when together, enjoyment of sexual life and absence of mistrust and suspicion. It is the will of God for love and intimacy to grow in marriage. There is no justification for Christians to live in bitterness and strife.

MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

Jesus teaching on marriage and divorce was given in an answer to a question from the Pharisees. "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" (Mathew 19:3). This was an opportunity for the Pharisees to know Jesus' view on the Shammai-Hillel debate. The school of Rabbi Shammai held that divorce was only allowed for serious sexual misconduct, while the school of Rabbi Hillel held that divorce was warranted for any reason, for example, bad cooking.

Jesus categorically, rejected the laxity of Hillel and advocated the permanence of marriage. Jesus dismissed the Mosaic divorce law as a concession to human sinfulness (Mark 10: 3-5). He referred the Pharisees to Genesis 2:24 " the two shall be one flesh" hence, what God has joined together, no human being is free to put asunder. Commenting on the particularism of Jesus' instruction on marriage and divorce, Gordon Wenham wrote:

Mathew's account of Jesus' teaching on divorce is geared more closely to the Jewish scene and more pointedly addresses the male chauvinism that blamed women for adultery and divorce. A man may commit adultery in the heart by looking lustfully at a woman, but by divorcing an innocent wife a man causes her to commit adultery (Mathew 5: 28- 32) (170).

Jesus called remarriage after divorce "adultery". John Stott summarizes the position of Jesus on remarriage thus:

A man who divorces his wife, and then remarries, both commits adultery himself, and because it is assumed that his divorced wife will also remarry, causes her to commit adultery as well (Mathew 5: 32). A woman who divorces her husband and remarries similarly, commits adultery (Mark 10: 12). Further, a man who marries a divorcee commits adultery (266).

Jesus permitted divorce and remarriage on the sole ground of immorality. It must be pointed out that divorce for immorality is permissible, not mandatory. On this, Stott commented:

Jesus did not teach that the innocent party must divorce an unfaithful partner, still less that sexual unfaithfulness *ipso facto* dissolves the marriage. He did not even encourage or recommend divorce for unfaithfulness. On the contrary, his whole emphasis was on the permanence of marriage in God's purpose and on the inadmissibility of divorce and remarriage (267).

CONCLUSION

Marriage requires sacrificial love. Divorce must not be contemplated on trivial reasons. The dignity of womanhood must be recognized in marriage. Between husband and wife, there must be mutual respect. Iwe has said that the undeniable dignity of womanhood and the unquestionable equality of men and women demand a partnership characterized by temperamental compatibility, equality, mutual respect and understanding (173). Parties to the marriage contract should know from the beginning that it is a permanent bond. It is in the interest of society that marriage be permanent.

Marital stability is a *condition-sine-qua-non* for social progress and egalitarianism. Historian Will Durant has attributed the fall of ancient Greece civilization to the collapse of the family. "The essential cause of the Roman conquest of Greece was the disintegration of Greek civilization from within" (qtd. in *Making Your Family Life Happy* 7). Durant also contended that the strength of Rome was the family, but when the family broke down because of sexual immorality, Roman Empire collapsed.

The marriage bond is more than a human contract: it is a divine yoke. And the way in which God lays this yoke upon a married couple is not by creating a kind of mystical union but by declaring his purpose in his word. Marital breakdown, even the so-called 'death' of a relationship, cannot then be regarded as being in itself a ground for dissolution. For the basis of the union is not fluctuating human experience but the divine will and word (they become one flesh) (Stott 265).

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