

Marriage: A Holy Ordinance

By Malcolm H. Watts

The Ten Commandments are no longer considered the undergirding structure of modern life. As a nation, we seem to have cut loose from our moorings and we are drifting into dangerous and troubled waters.

People speak of the “permissive society”. As defined by John Robinson, the former Bishop of Woolwich, “permissiveness” is “freedom from interference or control, doing your own thing, love, laxity, licence, promiscuity – and, in terms of verbs, swinging, sliding, eroding, condoning.” The permissive society simply means a society freed from moral restraints. Some may remember how, in the sixties, a prominent politician achieved notoriety by

welcoming the permissive society and equating it with the “liberated society”.

It was during the sixties that permissiveness was helped by legislation. In 1966 Mr. George Thomas, Parliamentary Secretary to the Home Office, wrote to the “Sunday Times”, saying: “Unless a halt is called now, we will be on the way to decadence from which it will be very difficult to recover.” Such warnings went unheeded, and now we are beginning to suffer the consequences. One of the most disturbing is the present general breakdown of law and order. In this year’s Disraeli Lecture, Norman Tebbit actually identified the permissiveness of the sixties as the main cause of today’s rioting and lawlessness. “A breakdown in moral order”, as Sir

Frederick Catherwood observes, "leads to a breakdown in civil order."

There are, of course, other evils which spring from permissiveness. Whenever chastity is reckoned an outmoded concept and "liberal" attitudes prevail, the result is immorality. At the present time, with the pressure on us brought to bear by press, books, magazines, television and cinema,

marriage is the only condition in which it is allowable for two people to cohabit. The author of Hebrews says: "Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled," (Heb.13:4)

2) The seventh Commandment, "Thou shall not commit adultery" (Ex 20:14), guards the sanctity of marriage by forbidding all sexual relations outside it.

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this is becoming increasingly evident. Even Christian young people are being affected. It is high time for Church and Nation to hear the Word of God and take account of God's unchanging standards.

The Bible unsparingly condemns the modern fashion for promiscuity. In particular, it declares premarital and extra-marital sex to be wrong, and always wrong.

Let us consider its teaching on the subject.

1) The book of Genesis describes the institution of marriage. In the creation ideal, marriage precedes physical union and is sealed by it. "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh." (Gen.2:24) Later revelation confirms this order, insisting that

Scripture also contains express prohibitions of "fornication" (or unchastity), such as: "Abstain ... from fornication"; "the body is not for fornication ... flee fornication"; and "this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication." (Acts 15:20; 1 Cor 6:13,18; 1 Thess. 4:3) Professor George Bush comments: "Sins against the laws of chastity are more frequently forbidden, more fearfully threatened, and marked by more decisive tokens of divine reprobation, than perhaps those of any other part of the Decalogue."

3) Throughout the Bible, example reinforces precept. When Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities of the plain, were "giving themselves over to fornication", Lot refused to be seduced by what he saw and heard, and he "vexed his

righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds." (2 Pet 2:7; Jude 7) Joseph even had a personal "offer" made to him, but he rejected it with abhorrence and on the grounds that it was "great wickedness" and "sin against God." (Gen 39:9; cf. 20:9) Scripture identifies God's people as "the pure" and "clean", men and women with "clean hands and a pure heart". (Ps.18: 18; 24:3,4; Jn.15:3) and declares that the strictest avoidance of fornication "becometh saints." (Eph.5:3)

4) God insists on proper marriage. He says it is immoral and altogether unacceptable for an unmarried couple to live together, no matter how sincere and faithful to each other they may be. Under the law, if a man fell in love with a woman and had a sexual relationship with her, he was commanded to "endow her to be his wife" i.e. marry her (Exod.22: 16). The relationship was considered promiscuous and was certainly not regarded as marriage. The two people had to get married! Our Lord made the same distinction when he said to the Samaritan woman: "Thou hast had five husbands; and he whom thou now hast is not thy husband." (John 4:18) He set her present union in contrast with biblical and lawful marriage. The legitimacy of the former was denied. The necessity of the latter was affirmed.

5) Marriage is commended, not because it is a cherished tradition, nor because for some people it is the preferred

alternative, but because it is opposed to unchastity and designed to prevent the evil of two people living together unlawfully. "To avoid fornication", says Paul, "let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband." (1 Cor.7:2 cf. v.9. See also: Heb.13:4.) Physical intimacy outside marriage and physical intimacy inside marriage are definitely not equally valid options. As Professor John Murray has said: "When the alternative is the peril, or tragedy, of fornication, there is no escape from the obligation to marry."

Since marriage is so important, we need to understand what is meant by it. How shall we define it? An old and rather quaint definition comes from Dr. John Brown of Haddington: "Marriage is a solemn contract, whereby a man and woman, for their mutual benefit, engage to live together in a kind and affectionate manner." A well-known contemporary author, Dr. Jay Adams, defines it in this way: "Marriage is a formal (covenantal) arrangement between two persons to become each other's loving companions for life." We may conclude that it is a legal bond, entered by solemn vows and promises, obliging two people to live together until death separates them.

Now what precisely constitutes a marriage? Let us consider the essential features.

a) A solemn ceremony. When marriage

was instituted, "the Lord God ... made ... a woman, and brought her unto the man ..." (Gen.2:22) Thomas Manton remarks: "God would not put Adam and Eve together without some regard, as he did the brutish and unreasonable creatures; but doth solemnly, as it were, bring the woman by the hand to the man, and deliver her into his hands." While far from excluding natural joy (v.23), this first and pattern marriage was formal and deeply impressive.

b) Performed in public. Although only God was present, the marriage in Eden was without concealment. It should always be like that. The "leaving" and "cleaving" must be open and recognizable acts (Gen.2:24). Scripture tells us of the way Boaz and Ruth contracted their marriage. It was in the presence of many people. "Boaz said unto the elders, and unto all the people, Ye are witnesses this day that ... Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of Mahlon (now deceased), have I purchased to be my wife" (Ruth 4:9,10). "It would be a menace to the social order", says Dr. Newman Smyth, "should marriage be permitted as a private, unauthorized and unwitnessed consent of a man and woman to live together as husband and wife."

c) According to civil law. In Adam's day there was no State and therefore no State law. God Himself both authorized and legalized the marriage (Gen.2:22-24). Thereafter, however, marriage had a definite legal and civil aspect. The State

had chief responsibility for the institution (See, for example, Deut.22:13-21) Contracts of marriage were drawn up (cf. Deut.24:3 - "bill of divorcement") and preserved for public records (the genealogies). In fact, it seems that special "officers" were appointed to look after these administrative matters. They are mentioned in Deuteronomy 1:15. "The Hebrew word (translated "officer") indicates any official whose task involved writing; in legal matters a clerk, perhaps also notaries who drew up contracts." (J. Ridderbos, in The Bible Student's Commentary) Enough has been said to show that marriage should always be according to the law of the land.

d) Formal covenant. In the Genesis account, mutual acceptance and promise is implied (read again Gen.2:22,23). Later in His Word, God calls marriage a "covenant": "The Lord hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth ... she is thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant." (Mal 2:14 cf. Prov 2:17) A covenant requires the free and voluntary consent of both parties (Gen.24:58), the making of solemn vows and promises (cf. Ezek 16:8) and, of course, the presence of adequate witnesses (Ruth 4: 9-11 - "The ten elders formed, so to speak, the necessary official witnesses." Lange's Commentary) Marriage, however, is a special covenant, involving a total claim of two persons on each other. It must never be treated lightly. An old Baptist certificate of marriage (seventeenth

century) shows how careful we should be. It reads: "We do now, in the presence of Almighty God, and the witnesses hereafter named, ratify the contract and covenant-act of marriage this day verbally made; in both which we do, in the fear of God, mutually and solemnly, and for our part respectively promise, in the strength of God, to live together in the state of marriage, according to God's ordinance, from this day forward, to love each other as husband and wife, and faithfully to perform all the duties to which we are bound by God's law, and the good laws of the land, in that case provided, till the Lord by death shall separate us."

e) A giving away. "In the first institution of marriage", writes Henry Smith, "when there was no father to give consent, God supplied the place of the father, and brought his daughter unto her husband, Genesis 2:22, and ever since the father, after the same manner, hath offered his daughter unto the husband." Scripture represents it as the right of the father to "give" his child in marriage: "he that giveth her in marriage" (1 Cor 7:38 cf. Gen 29:19; Ex 22:17; Deut 7:3; Josh 15:16,17; Jer 29:6; Matt 22:30). In the marriage service it is no mere formality. It is an evidence of consent and, according to divine law, this consent should always be obtained.

f) The Word of God. After uniting Adam and Eve in marriage, God appears to have commanded them faithfully to live

together. Our Lord said that it was "He who made them at the beginning" who said, "For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh." (Matt 19:4,5 cf. Gen 2:24) It is therefore most appropriate to read and expound the Scriptures before the newly-wedded couple. Does not Paul say that "marriage" is one of the blessings "sanctified by the Word of God and prayer" (1 Tim 4:3-5)? It is by hearing God's instructions and seeking His favour, that marriage, is "hallowed" to our lasting good. Consider this account of Thomas Boston's marriage, taken from his Memoirs: "The action was gone about most sweetly by Mr Mair. The Lord directed him to most seasonable and pertinent exhortations, and they came with power and life. Of a truth God owned it, and it was sweet both to Him and us. As for my part, my heart, being touched with the finger of God, was sensibly going forth in love to Christ, and admiration of Him, to my great comfort and satisfaction. So we were married (July 17th, 1700) betwixt eight and nine o'clock at night."

g) Heavenly blessing. "And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion ..." (Gen.1:28). The pronouncing of this blessing upon Adam and Eve is omitted from the account in chapter 2, but it evidently concluded the marriage service. Having married them,

God declared His intention to pour upon them all the goodness they were able to receive. Even so today, the Minister pronounces blessing upon both husband and wife, and declares that the Lord's mercy and grace is towards them. And God, present in the assembly of His people, is pleased to grant the benediction of His love (Ps.128:1-6).

"Therefore now let it please thee to bless the house of thy servant ... for thou O Lord, hast spoken it: and with thy blessing let the house of thy servant be blessed for ever" (2 Sam 7:29).