

Marriage: An Holy Ordinance

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MARRIAGE the Bible says “is honourable in all” (Hebrews 13:4). What exactly does this mean? It means that “celibacy” or the “unmarried state”, sometimes involving a vow to remain single for life, is not, as the Church of Rome erroneously maintains, a state of superior sanctity of holiness (see 1 Timothy 4:1-3) on the contrary, marriage is worthy of the utmost respect and honour “in all”, that is in all respects and among all persons.

Among the reasons for it being held in honour are the following: first of all, God originally ordained it (Genesis 2: 18-24); secondly, it is among the most ancient of institutions (Matthew 19:4-6 – “at the beginning”; thirdly, it was observed by Adam and Eve in their state of innocence in the Garden of Eden or Paradise (Genesis 2:15) ;fourthly, the intention behind it is to provide the closest possible companionship and the benefit of mutual assistance (Genesis 2:18, Ecclesiastes 4); fifthly, it is hereby that children are lawfully procreated and families lawfully constituted (1:27,28; 2:24); sixthly, it allows natural and proper desires to flow in the right channel (1 Corinthians 7:2; seventhly, the son of God attended a marriage at Cana, in Galilee, where he performed His first miracle (John 2:1-11); eighthly, in our Lord’s public teaching He did not hesitate to liken the kingdom of God to a marriage (Matthew 22:1-14); ninthly, Scripture teaches that, in a spiritual sense, Christ Jesus is wedded to His church (Ephesians 5:22-32); Revelation 19:7-9; and tenthly, by the blessing of God, marriage makes for true happiness among those for whom it is intended and who enter this holy estate (Genesis 1:27,28, 2:18 – it is “good” for mankind).

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.

Moreover it involves one man and one woman. There is nothing clearer in the whole of God’s written word.

1. God’s revealed will was stated from the beginning it was that by marriage between as male and a female there could take place procreation or reproduction, and this is made clear from the words, “male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth” (Genesis 1:27, 28). Any other so called union, being unnatural, does not find divine support or approval, and, of course, is unable to produce an offspring or children.
2. After Adam’s creation, God made a woman and brought her to the man, and said: “shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.”(Genesis 2:22). When cited by our Lord Jesus Christ, He makes it clear it was actually god who authoritatively spoke these words to our first parents.”Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall

a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh?" (Matthew 19:4,5)

3. Thereafter it became the practice, even for Adam's sons, to marry women or wives. Hence we read in Genesis, chapter 4, and verse 17 that "Cain knew his wife (who was of necessity a sister (see Genesis 5:4) who had followed him into exile, close interbreeding at this time being without serious genetic damage) and she conceived" (Genesis 4:17). Thus from those earliest times, marriage was understood to be – and only to be – between a man and a woman. In the book of Genesis mention is made later of "Abram's wife", Sarai (Genesis 16:1) and Abraham instructed his servant to make a journey to Paran in order to take, as he says, a wife unto my son, a woman, later introduced to us as Rebekah (24:4,15, See also: 21:21; 28:1,2).
4. Subsequent Mosaic laws refer to the settling of children in marriage and while it is forbidden to facilitate any such marriage with the heathen Canaanites, the wording at this point is both significant and noteworthy: "thou shalt (not) take of their daughter unto thy sons" (Exodus 34:16) and, in another place, it is said; "thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son" (Deut 7:3). On the other hand, the positive is expressed in the prophecies where God is reported as saying, "take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands" (Jeremiah 29:6).
5. The teaching of Christ (already noted above, under (ii) was to confirm the doctrine of the creation narrative, which he evidently did when he quoted from the book of Genesis that a man should "leave father and mother", and should cleave to his wife and that they twain (i.e. the two – the man and his wife, words added by our Lord for the purpose of greater clarity and emphasis) shall be one flesh (a reference to the

most intimate union, befitting a husband and wife only) (Matthew 19:5)

6. Following our Lord, the apostle sets out for himself the Bible's teaching. He writes to the Corinthian church: "Let every man have his own wife, and every woman have her own husband" (1 Corinthians 7:2). That marriage can only be between a man and a woman is borne out by apostolic exhortations to the mutual responsibilities (Ephesians 5:22-33; Colossians 3:18, 19; 1 Peter 3: 1-7).
7. The family, according to God's word, is a man with his wife and, if it pleases God, children, who will be "as olive plants around the table". God's blessing rests there and not on some other arrangement, whether it is called a "partnership" or a "marriage" (Psalm 128).

The Coalition Government under the leadership of David Cameron and Nick Clegg, is presently holding a public consultation (which closes on 14 June) in order to introduce legislation which will re-define marriage and legalise (invent) same-sex or homosexual "marriage". Lynne Featherstone, the "Equalities" Minister, is on record as saying that despite the term "consultation", the legislation is already a "done deal". Her actual words were: "The essential question is not whether we are going to introduce same-sex civil "marriage", but how" and she added that anyone who disagreed could be "fanning the flames of "homophobia".

It is totally and utterly shocking that a government which omitted any mention of this in its Manifesto, should now so arrogantly take it upon itself to attempt to change the divine institution and ride roughshod over the views of the British people. David Cameron is the man who, a few months ago, in Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, declared Britain "a Christian country". He even called upon people to "stand up and defend" the "values and morals" taught in "the Bible" and said the time had

come for public figures to teach “right from wrong” and to defend those values in the face of “moral neutrality”. Well, it is a great pity that he appears so abysmally ignorant on what the Bible actually teaches on the nature of marriage; and it is as hypocritical as it is censurable that he is presently engaged in leading a campaign so utterly at variance with the Bible and so godless and immoral. God’s holy word solemnly states that “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (Romans 1:18)

The Bible forbids, and unsparingly condemns, so-called “homosexual marriage”; and distasteful as the subject is to us, we shall now consider the biblical teaching on this:

- Homosexuality is strictly prohibited, as in Leviticus 18:22; “Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination”. It is to be observed that it is not only contrary to God’s revealed will, but it is declared to be an abomination – a very strong expression, derived from the word “to hate” or “to detest”. Homosexual activity is repugnant to a holy God. In the context of this verse it is linked with child sacrifice (verse 20) and bestiality (verse 23).
- Like prohibition can be found in Deuteronomy 23: 17, 18. Judging by the terms used here (whore and sodomite), words coming rather strangely from a Hebrew root meaning holy or scared, it seems clear that the passage concerns temple prostitution which was rife in Near Eastern religions and especially common in heathen worship (Mystery Babylon Religion). Here, in this Scripture, the men and women engaged in this kind of activity were lesbians, the word “whore” in the margin, being translated “sodomitess”, and the word “sodomite” being plain enough to understand and referring to homosexuals. These persons evidently gave themselves to prostitution in the service of their deity, whether Baal or Ashtoreth. The divine law

contained in these two verses forbade all such activity; and subsequently, of course, several kings sought to cleanse the land of such people (1 Kings 15:12; 22:46; 2 Kings 23:7). We particularly note however, the derogatory terms used for such people – “whore” and “dog” (Revelation 22:14,15) – and the fact that their sinful gains were not to be brought into the House of God, shows that the activity was reckoned to be corrupt and defiling.

- Men who engage in such practice are held responsible for what they do; and such depravity and perversity in former times subjected the perpetrators’ to the penalty of death; “If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them” (Leviticus 20:13).
- In the sacred history, awful judgement fell from heaven upon this degrading behaviour. We think immediately of the city of Sodom where the male citizens gather together at Lot’s house with the intent of fulfilling their homosexual lusts and engaging in homosexual activities with Lot’s visitors.”Bring them out unto us” they said, “that we may know them” (a common euphemism for the sexual act) (Genesis 19:5). It was for this that God destroyed that city with “brimstone and fire” from “heaven” (19:13, 24, 25). “Sodomy” the name for homosexuality, has been taken from the name of this wretched and condemned city (cf. Judges 19:22-30, where there is a horrendous account of something similar that happened in Gibeah).
- The apostle reprobates homosexuality in his epistle to the Romans and chapter 1. He views it, in the progression of sin, as the ultimate vice to which God judicially abandons men and, in reference to it, he writes of vile affections (literally “shameful passions”) and of activity that is “against nature” and contrary to “natural use”

(verses 26 and 27). He calls it “their error” (their departure from truth and holiness) describing it as “unseemly” (“indecent”, “disreputable”) and “doping those things which are not convenient” (“not proper” or “becoming”) (verses 27 & 28), and concludes with the words, “they which do such things are worthy of death” (verse 32).

- In 1 Corinthians 6 and verses 9 and 10, the same apostle lists a number of typical sins and sinners, including the “effeminate” and abusers of themselves with mankind”, by which he would have us understand passive and active homosexuals; and he then solemnly declares that such, without repentance and conversion, “shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (i.e. they will not be allowed to enter or enjoy God’s future and glorious kingdom).
- The same phrase occurs in 1 Timothy, chapter 1 and verses 9 and 10, where it is emphatically stated that such sinners, “them that defile themselves with mankind” (one word in the original, but composed of two; namely “male” and “bed”) act in a deviant and perverse way that is contrary to both “Law” and “Gospel”. Thus God through the Scripture, exposes the nature of this sin in such a way that none can make excuse or escape. God, the Judge of all, has most solemnly pronounced against homosexual “marriage”.
- Although there is a need for plain statements of truth, this is certainly not to be understood as it we hated homosexuals. The Word of God teaches, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Matthew 22:39) and so we love these people and we pray that they will turn to Christ, the only hope of men, that they may be saved from both the guilt and the power of their sins.

To return we have established that God’s Word

teaches that marriage should only take place between one man and one woman.

Brief mention can now be made of the preparative steps to a proper marriage.

Those who are single will need to pray (Genesis 24:63) - “to meditate” includes both contemplation and prayer. See marginal reading here): first, that God will make known His will for them (and remember it is not God’s will for everyone to marry, 1 Corinthians 7:7,17); and second, that if it is God’s will, He may lead us to the right person He has chosen for us (Genesis 24:12-21, 27; Proverbs 19:14b).

Then, it may be, that in the gracious providence of God, two people are brought together and meet each other (Genesis 2:22).

What follows sometimes is instant attraction which could just prove to be the beginnings of love. This is commonly referred to as “love at first sight”, but whether or not it comes immediately; it must of necessity come eventually. (Genesis 29:18).

After this, there will be a period of courtship, which is really a period of friendship and of getting to know each other, with an intent to marry (Proverbs 30:18).

When concluded the parties may well be ready to commit. And so there will be an engagement, similar in some respects, but not in all, to Jewish betrothal or espousal (Exodus 22:16, Matthew 1:18).

At last, of course, there is the big day – the wedding. Scripture alludes to some marriage customs which still continue today; for example, the bride’s wedding dress (Isaiah 49:18, Jeremiah 2:32), the best man and other friends of the bridegroom (John 3:29), Judges 14:11); the bridesmaids, in attendance upon the bride (Psalm 45:14; Matthew 25:1,2); and after the ceremony, the wedding feast (Judges 14:1,2,10); Matthew 22:2-4); John 2:3; Revelation 19:9). Now this is all most interesting but what are the

things that precisely constitute a marriage? Let us consider the essential features.

1. 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.
2. 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.”
3. 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.

4. 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.”
5. 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.

6. 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).

May the Lord grant continued blessing to this holy ordinance, and indeed to all our marriages and to our all families.