

# BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES ON MARRIAGE

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## God's Original Plan for Marriage

The origin of marriage. According to Scripture, marriage was instituted and divinely blessed as the closest human relationship. On the sixth day of creation week God performed the first wedding, bringing together the first man and woman as equal partners (Gen. 2:18-25). The divine intent was for the first marriage to be the pattern for all future marriage relationships: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife and they shall become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). During His earthly ministry, Christ reaffirmed the creation plan for marriage (Matt. 19:3-6; Mark 10:6-9).

The defining elements of marriage. In the Genesis account, marriage is a lifelong, exclusive union between a male and a female. It has three essential elements: 1) leaving father and mother; 2) being joined to each other; and 3) becoming one flesh. "Leaving" implies the creation of a distinct family unit publicly recognized by the couple's families, the community of faith and the society at large. "Being joined" refers to the mutual commitment of the couple expressed in a formal marriage covenant. "Becoming one flesh" describes both the sexual union and the process of growth in intimacy, unity, and fulfillment that God intends a couple to experience in all aspects of their lives.

The purposes of marriage. Marriage was instituted by God to meet the fundamental human need for love, companionship and community (Gen. 2:18). It is the divinely ordained setting for sexual intimacy and is intended to safeguard the virtues of purity and faithfulness (Gen. 2:24, 25). God designed the complementary relationship between the genders to enhance the development of human wholeness and a fuller understanding of each other and of God and His love. The first couple was given the shared task of caring for the earth and its resources (Gen. 1:26). They were also privileged to cooperate with God—reflecting His creativity, sharing in the joys of establishing family, providing for the care and nurture of children, and perpetuating the human race (Gen. 1:28). While divine revelation places a high value on children and expresses the joy to be found in parenting, Scripture never presents procreation as an obligation of every couple in order to please God (Matt 19:14; Ps 127:3). The narratives of Scripture illustrate how the tasks and priorities related to these purposes vary over time and circumstances for each marriage.

The preeminence of marriage. In Scripture, marriage is recognized as the cornerstone relationship in the family and takes precedence over all other human relationships. The biblical injunction to "leave father and mother" implies that the couple is sufficiently mature to establish and maintain a new family unit. They are to give priority to protecting the boundaries around their relationship, even as they receive support, nurture, or counsel from family members and others who can help them (Gen. 2:24; Song of Solomon; Matt. 19:6; Eph. 5:21-33).

The covenant of marriage. The foundational passage on marriage in Genesis 2:23, 24 describes marriage in covenantal language. In the divine plan for marriage, husband and wife as equals make a covenant with each other before God. In the biblical sense, this covenant is a binding commitment that includes promises, privileges, and obligations. With solemn and sacred vows, the couple seals their covenant, pledging love, loyalty, and dedication to each other as long as they both live (Prov. 2:17; Mal. 2:14). The marriage covenant, which in many respects resembles God's covenant with His people, is grounded in divine grace (Ezek. 16:4-8; Eph. 1:6).

Marriage as covenant implies mutual steadfast love, goodwill, fidelity, and commitment to permanence (Ps. 89: 28-34; Song of Solomon 8:6, 7; Is. 54:5, 10; Jer. 32:40, 41; Hosea 2:19-23; 3:1-3; Rev. 21:2, 3).

Sexual intimacy in marriage. Sexual intimacy between a man and a woman in marriage is an exquisite and sacred gift granted to the human family by God at creation. It is an integral part of marriage, reserved for marriage only (Gen. 1:31; 2:24; Ex. 20:14; Prov. 5:15-17; Song of Solomon 4:12 - 5:1; 8:10; 1 Cor. 7:1-4; Heb. 13:4). The sexual relationship is designed by God as an experience of love, pleasure, celebration, and bonding between husband and wife, a blessing to be enjoyed without shame and received with thankfulness. Sexual intercourse and love-play are portrayed in Scripture as a wholesome, delightful expression of togetherness that promote an ever-increasing closeness, happiness, and security between husband and wife (Gen. 2:23-25; Prov. 5:18-20; Song of Solomon). A loving marriage relationship is God's chosen setting to provide a secure environment for the procreation, care and nurture of children (Gen. 1:28; 4:1; Eph. 6:4).

Marriage as partnership. In the creation account, God provided Adam with "a helper comparable to him" (Hebrew, ezer kenegdo), an "equal partner." Their partnership was one of equality, mutuality, companionship and interdependence. In this relationship their individuality was preserved (Gen. 2:18, 21-22). As partners, husband and wife bear equal responsibility in the marriage (Gen. 1:26-28). Their partnership is a wholistic one in which spiritual compatibility is vital. Marriage of believer to believer is the biblical ideal (Amos 3:3; 2 Cor. 6:14).

Marriage as ministry. When Genesis speaks of God's creation of male and female in His image, it bestows value and dignity on both husband and wife and establishes their place as His representatives in the midst of His creation. The couple bears witness to the relational nature and oneness of the Godhead in their responsiveness to each other, in their capacity for love, intimacy, unity, creativity and procreativity, and in their co-regency and stewardship over all that He has made. With God's blessing, they are empowered to bring order and harmony to their world and by their careful management to be accountable for the nurture and care of their family and their environment. As they respond to this calling, they minister the love and grace of God to one another and to their wider community. Thus they exalt His name and testify of His power (Gen. 1:26-28; 2:15, 18-25; 1 Chron. 16:8-13; Psa. 34:1-3; cf. John 13:35; 1 Tim 5:8; 1 John 3:14; 4:20).

Marriage and the Sabbath. Marriage and the Sabbath are the two divine institutions that have come down to humanity from Creation. These twin institutions are paired in Genesis 1-2: the Sabbath forms the climax of the first creation account (Gen. 1:1 – 2:3), while marriage constitutes the apex of the second, complementary account (Gen. 2:4-25). Each illuminates our understanding of the other. The Sabbath provides a special time for the married couple to renew and celebrate their commitment to each other, to enjoy fellowship with one another and family, and to experience the many facets of Sabbath rest (Gen. 2:2, 3; Ex. 20:11; 31:16-17; Is. 58:13; Heb. 4).

### Marriage and Human Transgression

Responsibility for transgression. The Scripture holds both Adam and Eve accountable for the entrance of sin into the world (Gen. 3:6; Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:21, 22). They both denied responsibility for their behavior. Their failure to follow God's plan led to separation from Him and from one another (Gen. 3:8-13).

Effects of the Fall on the nature of marriage. The sin of Adam and Eve resulted in the loss of intimacy, mutuality, harmony and togetherness. Their relationship was marked by guilt, fear, shame, and blame (Gen. 3: 7-12). As a result of the Fall, the delicate balance in their marriage was lost. Under the curse of sin, the woman would now struggle with an inordinate desire for connectedness, even as the man would assume supremacy over her (Gen. 3:16). The curse on the ground and the pain that would now be experienced in childbirth set

the stage for strife over work, sexual desire, and procreation (Gen. 3:14-19). Many women came to be regarded and treated as property, even as slaves, and differences in power led to roles being rigidly prescribed and male domination and control being idealized (cf. Ex. 21:7-11; Esther 1:17-22). The sad effects of sin on marriage are often manifested in misunderstanding, neglect, conflict, alienation, and failure to love, accept and forgive one another. Violent and abusive behavior in human relationships are among the most destructive manifestations of the effect of sin (Gen. 4:8, 19, 23, 24; 6:11, 13; 2 Sam. 13:11-20; Ps. 11:5; Is. 58:4, 5; Rom. 13:10; Gal. 5:19-21).

Effects of the Fall on the permanence of marriage. God's original plan for the marriage covenant rests on principles of love, loyalty, exclusiveness, trust, and support upheld by both partners in obedience to God (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:6; 1 Cor. 13; Eph. 5:21-29; 1 Thess. 4:1-7). When these principles are violated, Scripture acknowledges that the marriage covenant is undermined and may even be destroyed (Deut. 24:1-4; Prov. 5:1-23; 6:20-35; Mal. 2:14; cf. Hos. 2:2-13). In addition to the death of a partner, other factors can lead to the destruction of a marriage. Sexual immorality, including a range of improper sexual behaviors, and desertion by an unbelieving partner are acknowledged in Scripture as circumstances that destroy the marriage covenant (Deut. 24; Matt. 5:32; 19:9; Rom. 7:2, 3; 1 Cor. 7:15). Other factors, such as abuse and violence in the family, also severely threaten and may break the marriage covenant (Mal. 2:14-16; cf. 1 Tim. 5:8).

Dissolution of marriage. Sin has wrought havoc with human relationships and has led to the breakdown and dissolution of many marriages. Annulment, repudiation (the putting away of a spouse), separation and divorce have become customary in many societies. Despite the social and legal support for these practices, they are not part of God's original plan for marriage (Matt. 19:8; Mark 10:5). Scripture expresses God's deep concern for families experiencing the trauma associated with all forms of marital dissolution. Laws were given in the Old Testament to limit the pain and damage such practices caused (Deut. 24:1-4; Hos. 2, 3; Mal. 2:13-16).

Cultural distortions of the marriage ideal. Since the entrance of sin, diverse cultural forms of family and sexual relationships have emerged that are not in keeping with the pattern set in Genesis 1-2. Some of these relationships, such as concubinage and polygamy, though tolerated in Old Testament times, were nevertheless out of harmony with the divine design. While levirate marriage fulfilled specific purposes in ancient times, it did not become Christian practice. Cohabitation, consanguinity, incest and same-sex liaisons are clearly condemned (cf. Ex. 22:16; Deut. 22:23-29; 27:20-23; Lev. 18:7-18; 20:11-21; 2 Sam. 13:11-13).

### Marriage and the Gospel

Restoration of God's creation intent for marriage. From the beginning of the entrance of sin, God has been actively at work to restore everything that was lost in Eden (Gen. 3:15; Hos. 11:8, 9; Eph. 1:3-10). The Bible consistently upholds marriage as honorable (Heb. 13:4). Many laws were given to protect the marriage covenant (Ex. 20:14, 17; Lev. 18; Deut. 5:18, 21; 22:13-30; 24:1-4). God uses marriage imagery to illuminate the special intimate relationship between Himself and His people (Is. 54:5; 62:5; Jer. 3:1; Hos. 2:19-21). The Bible writers celebrate married love (Prov. 5:18-20). One entire book of Scripture reflects the Edenic themes of joy, delight, mutuality, safety, and oneness experienced in the marriage relationship (Song of Solomon).

Redemptive work of Christ for marriage. In Jesus Christ, the fullness of God's redemptive plan was revealed (John 1:16; Gal. 4:4; Eph. 1:10; Heb. 1:1-4). In Him, the kingdom of God has come to us, to rescue us from this present evil age and to enable us to be filled with all the fullness of God (Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20; 17:21; Gal. 1:4; Eph. 3:17-19; Heb. 6:5). Because Christ has made all things new, the institution of marriage is now part of the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). With His inaugural miracle at Cana, Christ honored and blessed marriage and thereby signaled His will to effect a radical transformation of the marital experience among believers (John 2:1-11). He reaffirmed the creation view of marriage as a lifelong covenant before God between a man and a woman (Matt. 19:4-6; Mark 10:6-9). He exalted marriage, as did the prophets, by frequently referring to Himself

as a Bridegroom (Matt. 9:15; 25:1-13; Mark 2:19, 20; cf. John 3:29; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:32; Rev. 19:6, 7).

Effects of the gospel on the marriage relationship. The gospel opens the eyes of marriage partners to see one another as persons of value and worth redeemed by Christ, each deserving of dignity and respect. This is manifested in the gracious way they love, accept and forgive each other, their willingness to listen, to understand and to connect with each other. It can also be seen in the way they reconcile their differences and resolve their conflicts. The gospel has the power to transform both natural and cultural practices, freeing each couple to explore their giftedness and develop a partnership compatible with God's original design for marriage.

Jesus taught and modeled the way of spiritual leadership, demonstrating the appropriate limits of power and authority in relationships. He cautioned His followers not to lust after power, or to allow others to exercise undue power over them, as this is out of keeping with the principles of His kingdom. With Jesus came a new paradigm that invited both men and women to reach their full potential and to be responsive to each other's needs. Service to one another, humility and respect, rather than domination and control, characterize His followers (Matt. 18:1-4; 20:25-28; 23:1-12; Mark 9:35; 10:42-45; Luke 22:24-27; John 13:2-17; Phil. 2:1-8).

The marriage and family relationships of Christians are shaped by these gospel principles (Eph. 5:21-6:9; 1 Peter 3:1-7; 1 John 2:9, 10). At the cross of Christ humankind has been brought together and the barriers that have created inequalities between Jew and gentile, slave and free, male and female broken down (Rom. 2:11; 3:23; 1 Cor. 11:11; Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:14-18). Unity in marriage is achieved by mutual respect and love. No one is superior (Eph. 5:21-28). Paul's understanding that husbands and wives have equal rights and responsibilities in their sexual relationship exemplifies the larger mutuality to which Christian couples are called in marriage (1 Cor. 7:3, 4). The entrance of sin led to the subjection of the wife to the husband, however, the gospel emphasizes the love and submission of all believers, including husbands and wives, to one another out of reverence for Christ (Eph 5:21). Scripture gives special attention to the accomplishment in marriage of this mutual submission of believers. Husbands and wives are to submit to one another, wives through their love, respect and honor for their husbands (Eph 5:33; Col. 2:18; Titus 2:4; 1 Peter 3:1, 2), and husbands through their self-sacrificing love for their wives (1 Cor. 7:3, 4; Eph. 5:21, 24, 25). Husbands are called to honor their wives as fellow heirs of salvation in a grace-filled marriage (1 Peter 3:7). The principles of the gospel preclude either husband or wife assuming rulership within marriage.

Singleness as an option. The gospel allows for both singleness and marriage as valid options for adult living, including ministry as single persons like Jesus and the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 7:7, 8). While some, by choice or circumstance, are single, they may experience wholeness as individuals, connect with others through family and friends, and bring glory to God as single men and women (Matt. 19:12; Mark 3:33-35; 1 Cor. 7:7, 8). Sexual intimacy, however, is reserved for marriage (Prov. 5:15-19; Song of Sol. 2:6,7; 3:5; 8:3,4; 4:12; 8:8-10; Hos. 3:3).

### The Role of the Church

As the body of Christ, the church is called to be a faith community that is inclusive of all members, both single and married. In building a sense of community, the church concerns itself with strengthening all relationships, especially the marriage relationship which is foundational to family, church and society. Following the example of biblical leaders, those who lead God's people today are responsible for upholding God's ideal and proclaiming the divine will for marriage. Such ministry seeks to prepare children and youth in the family, church, and school for single or married adult life. It encourages couples to make wise marital choices, strengthens relational skills, and facilitates marital commitment and growth.

Whenever marital distress or breakdown occurs, the church as the family of God seeks to listen and understand, and to minister to all involved. The church respects the couple's responsibility for making decisions

regarding the future of their relationship. It also provides encouragement and support for them and their families in their hurt and pain, and connects them with resources as they experience reconciliation or grieve the loss of significant relationships. If the marriage does fail, the church accepts the responsibility to minister God's grace and forgiveness and shows understanding and compassion as a healing community.

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This statement was approved by the General Conference Department of Family Ministries World Advisory, March, 2006.