

The Christian Doctrine of Marriage

Dr. J. Alan Branch

God gave the gift of marriage. Jesus attended a wedding feast at Cana and His presence there demonstrates He saw marriage as a good thing (John 2:1 – 11). It was at Cana where Christ turned water into wine and performing such a dramatic miracle at a wedding emphasizes that God sees marriage as praiseworthy. Best of all, Jesus was invited to the wedding and *Jesus should be the main guest invited to every wedding.*

At Lisa and Alan's wedding, a friend sang Paul Stookey's *Wedding Song (There Is Love)*:

Well a man shall leave his mother and a woman leave her home
They shall travel on to where the two shall be as one.
As it was in the beginning is now and til the end,
Woman draws her life from man and gives it back again.
And there is love.
There is love.

Stookey beautifully pulls together the themes of creation and God's love in a celebration of a wedding. For Christians, both love and marriage are defined by the good parameters established by God. Indeed, a Christian marriage should be characterized by tender kindness, faithfulness, and love. Scripture teaches marriage is a gift designed by God and is supposed to be an embodiment of ordered love and fueled by grace.

In stark contrast to the Bible, our culture teaches that the essence of both sex and marriage is expressive individualism. One example of such thinking is found in a mass wedding performed at the Grammy Awards on January 26, 2014. Musical Star Queen Latifah (Dana Elaine Owens) officiated the mass wedding of 33 couples that night before a national audience, including several homosexual couples. The ceremony coincided with a performance by Macklemore and Ryan Lewis of the song *Same Love*,

an anthem for the rights of same-sex marriages. In spite of the bizarre twists and turns of modern culture, we must continue to stress that marriage – as defined by God – is a good thing. Daniel Heimbach stresses the importance of declaring the truth about marriage and says, “True marriage and truths about true marriage are matters of reality that may be confused or denied but never changed, and accepting lies can never be loving no matter how strongly others want to believe them.”¹

The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 defines marriage as follows: “Marriage is the uniting of one man and one woman in covenant commitment for a lifetime.”²

The Westminster Confession defines marriage as follows: “Marriage is to be between one man and one woman: neither is it lawful for any man to have more than one wife, nor for any woman to have more than one husband, at the same time.”³

I. Marriage Is Designed By God for the Good of Humanity

Marriage is designed by God for the good of all of humanity, meaning marriage is a common grace. To call something a *common grace* means it common to all humanity and its benefits are experienced by the whole human race without discrimination. Marriage is one way God exercises common grace to care for and sustain what He has made.⁴ To say marriage is designed for the good of all humanity does not mean it is necessarily God’s will for every person to be married as God’s will for

¹ Daniel Heimbach, “The Insidious Logic of the Court’s Marriage Decision,” July 2, 2015. Paper given to me personally by Dr. Heimbach.

² *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, Article XVIII, “The Family.” In 1860, influential Southern Baptist J.L. Dagg defined marriage as follows: “Marriage is a union of one man and one woman for life. It requires the full consent of the parties; and this consent ought to be intelligently expressed, according to the laws and usages at the time and place of forming the union.” J.L. Dagg, *The Elements of Moral Science* (New York: Sheldon and & Co., 1860; internet archive,) 242. It is interesting that Dagg doesn’t include the word *covenant* in his definition, though he does refer to marriage as a covenant when discussing divorce.

³ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Article 24, “Of Marriage and Divorce.”

⁴ Comments here influenced by P.H. Hughes, “Grace,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., Walter A. Elwell, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 519.

some people is chaste singleness. But it does mean everyone – married or single – benefits from the way in which marriage strengthens cultures.

A. Marriage is not a Social Construction

Marriage is God' idea and is rightly defined by God, yet a common claim of secular people is that marriage is merely a social construction, meaning some social agent produced or controls marriage and that marriage is not grounded in anything transcendent. To say something is a social construction assumes people construct, make, or invent understandings of the world as well as the encounters they have with others; claiming marriage is a social construction denies God has revealed what marriage is to be. Secular people believe that when Christians say marriage is heterosexual and monogamous, this is an artificial paradigm constructed to maintain power structures, with patriarchy usually the culprit. Instead of being made by God, secularists see marriage as something actively and creatively produced by some people to exercise power over other people. Based on such a view, Marxists view marriage as a tool invented by the Bourgeois to maintain capitalism; Feminists see marriage as something invented by men to subjugate women; The LGBTQ community sees the Christian view of marriage as something invented to sustain heteronormativity; transgender people see marriage as an artificial contrivance to reinforce the gender binary. If marriage is not designed by God but is just a social construct, then it can be rearranged in any manner one chooses and need not be limited to narrow, constraining ideas like heterosexual monogamy.

Marriage is not just something humans invented as a social construction and, therefore, cannot be modified in any willy-nilly manner. Marriage is created by God with purposes intended for the good of humanity. Genesis 2:24 – 25 clearly affirms heterosexual and monogamous marriage as God's standard. The opening line of Genesis 2:24 says, "For this reason," a phrase which directly connects Genesis 2:24 – 25 with the preceding discussion about the creation of the universe in Genesis 1 and

creation of man and woman in particular in Genesis 2:18 – 23.⁵ The desire for marriage is God-given. Marriage is God’s idea and not merely a social construction. God created marriage just as He created the universe and humanity.

B. Marriage is one method for exercising stewardship over the earth.

Marriage is one method for exercising stewardship over the earth. Genesis 1:26 says humans are made in God’s image, and then says, “Let them rule” over the various aspects of creation. The text says humans are to rule over things made on day five of creation (“over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky”). They are to rule over the things made on day six of creation (“the cattle . . . and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth”). And in the middle of the list, an inclusive statement summarizes human stewardship over the entirety of creation by saying they are to rule “over all the earth,” a phrase quite similar to Genesis 1:1. One way God has provided for wise stewardship over creation is the gift of marriage.

C. How is marriage good for everyone?

In what ways is the common grace of marriage good for everyone? First, marriage dignifies women and children. Marriage ensures that both women and children are provided for with basic physical, spiritual, and emotional needs and are not tossed to the side as expendable options in the lives of men. Heterosexual monogamous marriage also dignifies the goodness of children since children normally are eventually conceived. Unless there is a problem of infertility, the expectation is that children will eventually come and each act of sex has the potentiality of creating a new life.

⁵ The Feinbergs comment on the phrase “For this reason” in Genesis 2:24 and say that a man is married because he “recognizes a particular woman as suitable to be his mate.” John Feinberg and Paul Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 2nd ed., 590.

Second, marriage develops honor in the hearts of males. By encouraging men to marry and care for the women who have their children, men are provided with an environment which cultivates character and grows them into honorable people instead of selfish people. Timothy Keller explains:

Part of the traditional understanding of marriage was that it “civilized” men. Men have been perceived as being more independent and less willing and able than women to enter into relationships that require mutual communication, support, and teamwork. So one of the classic purposes of marriage was definitely to “change” men and be a “school” in which they learned how to conduct new, more interdependent relationships.⁶

Marriage teaches men to be other-focused; the hook up culture of our day teaches men to be self-centered.

Third, marriage develops financial security. Data consistently shows across cultures and ethnic groups that one of the wisest choices one can make regarding financial security is to wait until married to have children and then stay married to each other. Wealth increases a couple’s capacity to deal with an emergency and makes them less reliant on the government. In this way, married couples contribute more tax revenue and take less from tax proceeds. According the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis’ magazine *In the Balance*, “From 1989 to 2016, the typical married household had around three times as much wealth as a partnered or single household.”⁷

Finally, the context of marriage and family provide a safe place for the care of people when they are sick and dying. In our current era, we have seen the fervent call for the legalization of physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia. While there are many factors which have contributed to

⁶ Timothy Keller with Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 25.

⁷ Febaba R. Addo and Lowell Ricketts, “As Fewer Young Adults Wed, Married Couples’ Wealth Surpasses Others,” *In the Balance*, January 1, 2019, <https://www.stlouisfed.org/publications/in-the-balance/2018/as-fewer-young-adults-wed>.

the modern demand for medicalized killing, one major influence is that with fewer people getting married and having children, this means more people are growing old alone, and loneliness or the fear of dying unloved and alone often figures in euthanasia arguments.

II. God Designed Marriage with Redemption in Mind

God designed marriage with redemption in mind. Marriage both points to our need for redemption and is itself a picture of the redemption we find in Christ and the New Covenant. Even though God designed marriage before the Fall of man, God uses marriage as a picture of the redemption we have in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 5:25 – 30).

A. The Creation of Humans is Immediately Followed by the Fall.

The creation of humans in Genesis 1 & 2 is followed immediately by the Fall in Genesis 3:1 – 7. The simplest reading of the text in Genesis 3 is that Adam and Eve were reaching for “God-hood,” the most extreme form of radical autonomy. They wanted to be like God in a way not allowed by God. In the Fall, human thought and behavior turned violently from the divinely revealed worldview to a variety of human fantasies, suppressing God’s truth, and claiming intellectual and moral autonomy.⁸

The sort of autonomy central to the Fall becomes the core of most vexing problems between a husband and wife in marriage. Autonomy invariably leads to self-centeredness. Each spouse insists, “*My* needs come first!” And if the person to whom we are married turns out to be unable to meet our needs, then we drop them and search for another, better candidate.

If one reads the text of Genesis 2 & 3 with care, you will find the trajectory of the first year of marriage. In Genesis 2:23, Adam shouts for joy

⁸ Slightly modified from John Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Philipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2015), 251.

when he meets Eve, praising God as he exclaims, “Bone of my bone! Flesh of my flesh!” We can almost hear him sing a praise chorus. But only a few verses later after the Fall, God searches for Adam, and Adam cries in frustration Genesis 3:12, “The woman *whom You gave to be with me*, she gave me from the tree and I ate.” And for most of us, Genesis 2:21 and 3:12 bracket the first year of marriage, as we move from “Praise God!!” to prayers of frustration about “this person *You gave to me!*”

B. Marriage and Redemption

Marriage both points to redemption in Christ and needs redemption by Christ to be successful. In Ephesians 5:21 and following, Paul gives deep and profound teaching about marriage, quoting from the creation narrative of Genesis to make his argument. And in the middle of this he says in Ephesians 5:32, “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” The word *mystery* (μυστήριον / *mysterion*) doesn’t mean something esoteric or bizarre, but carries the idea of a secret too profound for human ingenuity, humans could never unravel this on their own but it is revealed by God (contra social construction!).⁹ And what is the mystery? That Genesis 2:24 is pointing forward to the plan of redemption. This is quite remarkable because Paul is saying that prior to the Fall, God was already thinking about redemption. Elsewhere, we are told we are saved “with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you.” (1 Peter 1:19 – 20) Herschel Hobbs, longtime pastor of FBC Oklahoma City said, “Salvation was in the heart of God before sin was in the heart of man.” Marriage points us to the plan of salvation.

⁹ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., Frederick William Danker, rev. and ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 662. This comes from a section addressing μυστήριον in Paul’s writings. BDAG gives this as the definition at the start of the section, but it is not clear if they intended it only for Romans 11:25, but the definition certainly fits with Ephesians 5:32. Also, Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 775.

Marriage also points to our need for salvation. In marriage, two fallen sinners will enter into a covenant relationship. The sin problem is so profound, Timothy Keller said, “You never marry the right person!”¹⁰ Indeed, if you are looking for the perfect person to meet all your needs, you are asking your spouse to do what only Jesus Christ can do. The home must be built on two pieces of wood shaped like a cross, with a foundation laid on an empty tomb. When considering where to build your home, I strongly urge that you build your home on the side of a hill called Golgotha.

Redemption is necessary for a successful marriage because we will fail each other and we will need to forgive each other. There are many verses of Scripture which are important regarding marriage, and typically when talking about how to make marriage work, we run to Colossians 3, Ephesians 5, or 1 Peter 3. Each of those passages are essential, but the most important Bible verse Lisa and I have discovered regarding marriage is Ephesians 4:32, “Be kind to one another, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” We are two sinners who married each other, and the way we learn to be kind and forgive one another is through a relationship with God’s Son Jesus Christ.

III. Marriage and the Gift of Gender

We live at a strange point in history. In the USA, marriage has been redefined to mean men “marrying” men, women “marrying” women, and who knows what forms of marriage we will see in the future. Much of the chaos about marriage is the result of a retrograde view of gender. Our culture views gender as a social construction, and urges people to choose their gender, thus resulting in confusing instances of men asserting they are truly women and women asserting they are men. The Bible teaches gender is not a social construction, but the gift of gender is a part of the

¹⁰ Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 31.

goodness of God’s creation. In light of this, God has created two genders and marriage is only truly marriage when a male is joined with a female.¹¹

Modern liberalism adamantly insists marriage is a patriarchal construct designed to subdue women. But marriage is not merely a social construct; marriage is designed and ordained by God for the flourishing of humans. Marriage is the core of a strong society which cares for weakest and most defenseless.

A. Genesis 1:26 – 28 and the Gift of Gender

Gender¹² differentiation, also known as the gender binary, is a fundamental part of God’s creation. Our gender is a gift from God to be celebrated and affirmed. Genesis 1:26 - 28 states:

²⁶ Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness. They will rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth.”

²⁷ So God created man in His own image;
He created him in the image of God;
He created them male and female.

²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. Rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every creature that crawls on the earth.”

Genesis 1:27 uses the Hebrew word *adam* to describe both the male and female. Though *Adam* can be a proper name, it can also be used as a noun to describe humanity, and that is the use in Genesis 1:27; By emphasizing

¹¹ I will not discuss here the rare instances of people born with ambiguous genitalia or genitalia which are discordant with their DNA. Such cases are the rare exception and should be handled sensitively. Suffice to say, the effects of the Fall even reach to the level of disruption within DNA itself and prenatal development. Such people should be shown much grace and their parents deserve special pastoral kindness.

¹² The dominant notion in our culture today is that sex and gender are completely separate concepts. Christians usually see the terms as synonyms.

that God made a male אָדָם (*adam*) and a female אִדָּם (*adam*), this passage affirms that sexuality is not an accident of nature, nor is it simply a biological phenomenon. Instead, gender, sexual identity and function are part of God's will for his image bearers.¹³ In contrast, secular people merely see gender as a social construction, a fluid concept with no real boundaries.

The gift of gender is intricately connected to uniqueness of humanity within creation. Throughout Genesis 1:1 - 25, when God created plants and animals they are clearly intended as references to large categories because they are created *after their kind*. But when God creates man and woman, the phrase "after their kind" is omitted, indicating humans are in a distinct class with no other parallel in creation. Humans are not made after their kind; humans are made in the image of God. The structure of Genesis 1 clearly shows humans are the pinnacle of creation, not an evolutionary accident emerging slowly over eons of time. Likewise, the gift of gender is an essential component of what it means to be made in the image of God.

B. Genesis 2:18 – 20 and Complementary Genders

Genesis 2:18 (NKJV): And the LORD God said, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him."

1. The First Human Crisis: Genesis 2:18

The first human crisis is described in Genesis 2:18. In Genesis 1, the recurring refrain "And God saw that it was good" emphasizes the pleasure God took in making the world and the essential goodness of creation.¹⁴ This prepares us for the stark contrast of Genesis 2:18a, "The LORD God said, 'It is *not good* for the man to be alone.'" What was it that God perceived as "not good"? Some have suggested that Adam was lonely and Eve was created to provide Adam companionship and as a cure to his

¹³ Victor Hamilton, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: Genesis 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1990), 139.

¹⁴ This differentiates Biblical Theism from various Gnostic systems which see matter as evil.

loneliness. Yet, we must be careful: Adam was in a perfect relationship with God, so it is hard to say he would have been lonely.¹⁵

At the same time, Adam was the only human. As I will argue below, one of the reasons the naming of the animals occurs between Genesis 2:18 and the creation of Eve in 2:21 is to amplify the fact that nothing else in creation was appropriate as his partner: He was in fact alone as the only human being. Humans are created for community with each other and this was not possible until God created Eve.

2. Marriage is God's idea

Genesis 2:18 clearly shows that Marriage is God's idea, not merely a cultural invention. God knows more about marriage than any blogger or whomever is blabbering on a TV talk show. God certainly knows more about marriage than any of the entertainers in Hollywood or Nashville.

3. Genesis 2:18 and "Helper"

Genesis 2:18 KJV: And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an **help meet** for him.

Genesis 2:18 NIV: And the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a **helper suitable** for him.

The Hebrew phrase translated "helper suitable" by the NIV is *'ezer kenegdo* (עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ) and it is a phrase which dignifies the woman and brings beautiful symmetry to the Christian doctrine of marriage. The Hebrew word translated *helper* is *'ezer* (עֵזֶר).¹⁶ The word *'ezer* is used in reference to

¹⁵ Mark Liederbach of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary says, "If the idea that Adam is "lonely" is allowed to dominate the translation of Genesis 2:18, then the great danger is that the focus of marriage shifts from fulfilling the God-given purpose of worshipping and obeying [God] in marriage to having a companion to fill my "emotional love tank." Mark Liederbach, "Marriage as Worship," A Paper Delivered at the 67th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society Meeting in Atlanta, GA Nov. 17 – 19, 2015, 6. Liederbach's critique has *The Five Love Languages* by Gary Chapman in mind, a book I actually find very helpful when used properly.

¹⁶ The noun עֵזֶר is derived from the verb עָזַר which means "I help" or "I support." The verb occurs around 80 times in the OT and it is used in reference to lots of different people. For example, In II Chronicles 28:23, Ahaz

God in 16 of its 19 appearances in the OT. For example, *'ezer* (עֲזָרָה) is used in Exodus 18:4 where Moses says, "God was my helper (*'ezer*); He saved me from the sword of Pharaoh." It is also used of God in Psalm 33:20, "Our soul waits for the LORD; He is our help (*'ezer*) and our shield." Since *helper* (*'ezer*) is used to describe God elsewhere in Scripture, the word *'ezer* is not used to demean women in Genesis 2:18, but signifies the woman's essential contribution, not her inadequacy.¹⁷ I agree with Ken Matthews when he says the use of *'ezer* in Genesis 2:18 specifies "a functional difference exists between the man and the woman." Matthews explains that *helper* is in no way demeaning and says, "There is no sense derived from the word [helper] linguistically or from the context of the garden narrative that the woman is a lesser person because her role differs. In the case of the biblical model, the "helper" is an indispensable "partner" required to achieve the divine commission."¹⁸

The Hebrew word translated *suitable* in Genesis 2:18 is *kenegdo* (כַּנְגְדוֹ). Matthews says a literal translation is "like what is in front of him" and that it indicates a *correspondence* between the man and the woman. This is highlighted by the manner in which God parades the beasts in front of Adam in Genesis 2:19 - 20, none of which are like Adam. Matthews states, "The focus is on the equality of the two in terms of their essential constitution."¹⁹ To call the woman a *suitable helper* means she is the corresponding, indispensable complement to the male. Again, this does not necessarily mean that single people are somehow inadequate, but it does

indicates he thought the gods of Damascus had "helped" (עֲזָרָה) the armies of Damascus defeat Ahaz. I suspect it is this wide use of the verbal form which leads Strachan and Peacock to say the word "helper" in Genesis 2:18 is a word "used for many Old Testament figures, including God himself." Owen Strachan and Gavin Peacock, *The Grand Design: Male and Female He Made Them* (Fearn, Ross-Shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2016), 28. But the derivative noun *helper* (עֲזָרָה) is generally used to designate divine help, in other words, help from God and is not used as broadly as the verbal form. See Carl Schultz, "עֲזָרָה" in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, eds. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 660 – 661.

¹⁷ Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 88.

¹⁸ Kenneth Matthews, *Genesis 1 – 11:26*, The New American Commentary, vol. 1 (Nashville: Broadman, 1996), 214. Bruce Waltke comments on the word helper and says, "The word *help* suggests that the man has governmental priority, but both sexes are mutually dependent on each other." Waltke, *Genesis*, 88.

¹⁹ Waltke, *Genesis*, 213.

mean God has designed things such that if we are married, males and females complement each other in unique and divinely crafted way.

While Genesis 2:18 emphasizes the equality of the man and woman, others take a decidedly negative view of the text, such as Susan Ann Brayford who comments on Genesis 2:18 and says, “The helper that God proposes to make for Adam will enable reproduction; this helper will also be seen as derivative from and thus *inferior* to Adam.”²⁰ Brayford is incorrect: While Genesis 2:18 does teach different roles for men and women in marriage, there is no intent to communicate the woman is inferior. Different roles for each spouse in marriage does not mean different value for the husband and wife in marriage.

Taken as a whole, the phrase *‘ezer kenegdo* implies role differentiation. Finley’s analysis of the passage seems accurate when he stresses that while the phraseology does not carry the idea of personal inferiority for the woman, the fact that the woman was created to help the man and not the other way around “gives the man a certain centrality.”²¹ This should not be taken to mean the husband has divine authority to be a tyrant or a dictator. Nothing of the such is true. The husband is to be a compassionate, Godly leader who puts his relationship with his wife before any other human relationship. The roles within marriage are not the unhappy necessities of the Fall, but such roles are woven into the tapestry of God’s original plan.

The KJV’s translation “a helper meet” in Genesis 2:18 comes from the Middle English *meten* and the Old English *metan*. In 1611, it carried the idea of “suitable,” reflected in the NIV. The KJV can be confusing here because the word *meet* is no longer used in that sense in modern English.

²⁰ Susan Ann Brayford, *Genesis*, in *Septuagint Commentary Series* (Boston: Brill, 2007), 231 – 232. Emphasis added.

²¹ Thomas Finley, “The Relationship of the Woman and the Man in the Old Testament,” in *Women and Men in Ministry*, Robert L. Saucy and Judith K. Tenelshof, eds. (Chicago: Moody, 2001), 56.

C. Joyful Exuberance of Marriage Genesis 2:21 – 23

Genesis 2:21 – 23 (HCS): ²¹ So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to come over the man, and he slept. God took one of his ribs and closed the flesh at that place. ²² Then the LORD God made the rib He had taken from the man into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³ And the man said:

This one, at last, is bone of my bone
and flesh of my flesh;
this one will be called “woman,”
for she was taken from man.

God looked upon the man’s need for companionship and created a woman for him. Adam responds in joyful exuberance and enthusiastically celebrates God’s gift when he sees the woman, “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh.” (Genesis 2:23a NASB). A similar phrase is used both in 2 Samuel 5:1 and 19:12, both in reference to people pledging loyalty to David. In this way, the phrase “bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh” is possibly an expression of covenant loyalty.

Matthew Henry’s (1662 – 1714) comment on Genesis 2:23 is famous: “That the woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam, not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved.”²² Who says Puritans were against romance? Centuries earlier, Augustine said something similar to Henry and commented on the fact the woman was made from man’s side: “Even these [man and woman] God did not create separately and join them as strangers, but He made the one from the other, indicating also the power of the union in the side from where she was drawn and formed. They are

²² Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary: New Modern Edition*, vol. 1, *Genesis to Deuteronomy* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 16.

joined to each other side by side who walk together and observe together where they are walking.”²³

IV. Genesis 2:24 – 25: Marriage is Heterosexual and Monogamous

Genesis 2:24 -25: 24 For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. 25 The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

Genesis 2:18 – 25 is the foundational passage of Scripture concerning marriage. All other discussions of marriage in Scripture assume Genesis 2 as the proper starting point for understanding matrimony. For example, both Jesus (Matthew 19:5) and Paul (Ephesians 5:31) appeal to Genesis 2:24 – 25 when discussing marriage.

A. Marriage is Heterosexual

God’s design is for marriage to be heterosexual, between a male and a female.

1. Genesis 1:26 – 28

The heterosexual nature of marriage is derived from the command to procreate. Genesis 1:26 – 28 clearly teaches one of the purposes for marriage is procreation. Procreation (apart from modern artificial reproductive technologies) can only occur between a man and a woman. Children should be an expected part of marriage, with the exceptions of infertility duly noted. Homosexual relationships cannot fulfill this mandate apart from the awkward and morally problematic use of sperm donors, egg donors, and surrogate mothers. The extraordinary means necessary for

²³ Augustine, *The Good of Marriage (De bono coniugali)*, in *Writings of Saint Augustine*, 15, Charles T. Wilcox, trans. (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1955), 9.

homosexuals to have children related to at least member of the couple (or throuple for some) demonstrates how far away from the design and intent of procreation such relationships actually are.

2. Genesis 2:24

The heterosexual nature of marriage is seen when Genesis 2:24 says a man leaves his father and mother to be united with his wife. This clearly shows God's design for marriage to be between a man and a woman and not some other arrangement. The man is joined to a wife, not to another man. The wife is joined to her husband, not another woman. Jesus himself reiterates this fact in Matthew 19:5 / Mark 10:7 – 8.²⁴ Thus, marriages between two males, two females, or some other combination are not really marriages even if sanctioned by the state.

B. Marriage is Monogamous

God's design is for marriage to be monogamous, between *one* male and *one* female.

1. Genesis 2:24

Genesis 2:24 – 25 is the foundational passage of Scripture about marriage and teaches that the man joins to his wife (singular) **and not** his wives (plural). The creation account assumes marriage will be between

²⁴ Megan Warner of the King's College in London tries to say Genesis 2:24 is not stressing heterosexual and monogamous marriage, but represents "the powerful attraction that causes human beings to seek relationship in opposition to the wishes of their parents, society, and religion." Megan Warner, "Therefore a Man Leaves His Father and Mother and Clings to His Wife: Marriage and Intermarriage in Genesis 2:24," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 136.2 (2017): 269. Warner's handling of the text is suspect and driven more by her own sexual revisionist agenda than by sound principles of hermeneutics. Furthermore, she considers Genesis 2:24 a post-exilic gloss to the original text. There is no manuscript evidence whatsoever for Warner's claim other than her own predilection for the documentary hypothesis. See Warner, 273.

one man and one woman. Furthermore, the man and the wife become one flesh, a fact which amplifies the monogamous nature of marriage since the term “one flesh” in Genesis 2:24 implies a complete unity and profound solidarity of the relationship itself,²⁵ a sort of solidarity impossible in cases of polygamy.

2. Proverbs 5:18 teaches monogamy

Proverbs 5:18 (NASB): Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth.

The monogamous nature of marriage is seen when Proverbs 5:18 encourages a husband to rejoice in the wife (singular) of his youth. The idea is that the wife of a man’s youth is his first wife *and only wife*. She is the same woman to whom he is married when he is older. The relationship is understood in strictly monogamous terms, and no other accumulation of additional spouses is in consideration.

3. 1 Corinthians 7:2 – 4 teaches monogamy

In I Corinthians 7:2, Paul says each man “should have his own wife, and each woman should have her own husband.” Paul here assumes the marriage consists of one man and one woman who share the gift of sex in marriage together.

4. Jesus Reaffirmed the Creation Standard

When asked about divorce, Jesus reaffirmed the creation standard of Genesis 1 & 2 that marriage is intended to be permanent, heterosexual, and monogamous (Matthew 19:4 – 6; Mark 10:6 – 9).

²⁵ Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 90.

5. While the Bible acknowledges the existence of polygamous marriages, these are never the standard which is held up as the model.

If heterosexual and monogamous marriage is the creation standard, what are we to make of other marriages in the Bible which don't meet this standard? What are we to make of Abraham, Sarah, and the concubinage of Hagar? Even more, what do we make of the marriage of Jacob to Rachel and Leah? What about David? What about *Solomon!*? The Bible accurately records polygamous marriages, but these are a deviation from the creation standard which were tolerated by God without being endorsed.²⁶

C. The Fall has messed up marriage!

In Genesis 3, the central component of Adam and Eve's sin was autonomy: They were reaching greedy hands towards "godhood." Autonomy is the very thing that must be surrendered if marriage is to succeed! By their rejection of God's law in their quest for autonomy, the very design of marriage was thwarted, and autonomy enslaved them to the wrong desires.

Genesis 3:16 (NASB): To the woman He said,
 "I will greatly multiply
 Your pain in childbirth,
 In pain you will bring forth children;
 Yet your desire will be for your husband,
 And he will rule over you."

D. Interpretative Mistakes of Polygamists

²⁶ Pro-LGBTQ author Teresa J. Hornsby of Drury University incorrectly says, "The burgeoning fields of queer biblical studies . . . seeks to show the heteronormative biases that punctuate biblical interpretation. For example, as one reads Genesis, apart from the example of Rebekah and Isaac, where does one actually find one married to one woman?" Teresa J. Hornsby, "Introduction; The Body as Decoy," in *Transgender, Intersex, and Biblical Interpretation* (Atlanta: SBL press, 2016), 4. Hornsby obviously overlooks Joseph and Asenath (Genesis 41:50 – 52).

People who argue the Bible permits polygamy distort Scripture at several different levels.

1. Polygamists wrongly assume everything recorded in narrative passages of Scripture is endorsed by God. Just because the Bible *records* something as happening does not mean it necessarily receives God's approval. For example, the Bible accurately records God's people as worshipping a golden calf at the foot of Mount Sinai, but such idolatry is soundly rejected by God.
2. Polygamists fail rightly to distinguish between didactic passages of Scripture and narrative ones.

The primary hermeneutical mistake of polygamists is to fail rightly to distinguish between narrative passages and didactic passages of Scripture, assuming the description of a practice in Scripture entails Divine approval of the practice described. One must take great care when making doctrinal or ethical conclusions based on historical narratives in the Scripture. Doctrinal or ethical conclusions based on the historical narratives must be guided by the norms found in the didactic passages of Scripture. Every didactic passage of Scripture which addresses marriage assumes heterosexual and monogamous marriage as God's standard. For example, the numerous warnings about adultery in Proverbs only make sense from the standpoint of monogamy, not polygamy. Furthermore, Paul's teaching about marriage in Ephesians 5 only makes sense when understood from the perspective of monogamy.

3. There are no polygamous marriages in the New Testament.

Polygamists fail to deal with the stark absence of anything like polygamy in the New Testament.

V. Marriage as Covenant

Scripture views marriage as a *covenant*, an idea of a much deeper commitment than modern ideas of marriage as a contract.²⁷ Marriage is not merely a private institution, but is a public covenant with implications for the broader community. From a Biblical perspective, a covenant is a binding agreement and a solemn promise made by an oath, which may be ratified by a verbal formula or a symbolic action, and in which God Himself is the guarantor and He acts in grace.²⁸ Since God is a God of grace, the marriage covenant is built on and empowered by God's grace, and is strengthened by intimacy with God and with each other. A marriage involves both a verbal formula and a symbolic action: A verbal oath in the form of wedding vows and the symbolic action of giving and receiving rings. A Biblical marriage is also a covenant in that it is a binding agreement between three parties: God, the husband, and the wife. A public covenant signals to the rest of the community that each member of the couple is now married and should be treated accordingly. In this way, the public covenant of marriage contributes to the stability of the marriage.²⁹

Christian spouses undergo many of the same experiences as non-Christians, but Christians are expected to view their marriages through the lens of a rich tradition that views marriage as a sanctified covenant.³⁰ Marriage is a holy covenant created by God in which the man and woman pledge to live in faithfulness to each other under God's gracious care and

²⁷ I grant that in some cases the English word *contract* can serve as a reasonable translation for covenant, especially in the New Testament, but here I am talking about the way the term covenant is used in reference to marriage as opposed to the shallow contractual view of marriage in modern culture.

²⁸ My terminology here is influenced and much modified from G.E. Mendenhall, "Covenant," in *The New Interpreter's Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, George Arthur Buttrick, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 714.

²⁹ While serving as a pastor in North Carolina, a man came to me for pastoral advice concerning his wife's purported adultery. He was not a member of my church nor did he attend my church, but I met him while doing door-to-door evangelism. As he explained his wife's unfaithfulness, I asked him when they got married. He responded: "We got married before God. I had my Bible open and we read some verses and we got married to each other before God." In his mind, he and his girlfriend alone in a room with a Bible was sufficient grounds to consider themselves married. They later had a civil ceremony. This odd story demonstrates some of the moral confusion about marriage that exists today related to seeing marriage as a highly privatized arrangement.

³⁰ James J. Ponzetti and Barbara Horkoff Mutch, "Marriage as Covenant: Tradition as a Guide to Marriage Education in the Pastoral Context," *Pastoral Psychology* 54.3 (January 2006): 216. The authors display lack of background knowledge on the First Century, describing marriage then as an "informal, private affair." This is flatly inaccurate.

blessing.³¹ When the troubles of life come, Christian couples respond from the strength of being in covenant with each other, and operate on the assumption of mutual care and edification regardless of what trials we face.

A. Marriage is specifically called a covenant in Scripture.

Two passages of Scripture specifically use the word covenant in relation to marriage.

1. Proverbs 2:17

Proverbs 2:16 – 17: To deliver you from the strange woman, from the adulteress who flatters with her words; That leaves the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God.

Proverbs 2:17 describes marriage as a covenant. In discussing the adulteress, Proverbs says she abandons the “companion of her youth,” a reference to her husband. Furthermore, her relationship with her husband is said to be a “covenant of her God.” Her marriage was a covenant made before God, and not merely a human contract to be broken indiscriminately. The idea in Proverbs 2:16 – 17 is that the first man the woman marries is supposed to be the one man to whom she is faithful for the rest of her life. The NET gets at the idea here and translates Proverbs 2:17 as, “Who leaves the husband from her younger days, and forgets her marriage covenant made before God.” Marriage is not merely a human contract, it is a covenant made before God.

2. Malachi 2:14 says marriage is a covenant.

Malachi 2:14 (NASB): Yet you say, ‘For what reason?’ Because the LORD has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth,

³¹ Louis A. Brighton, “Where Is the Holy Family Today? Marriage a Holy Covenant Before God – The Biblical Role of Man and Woman,” 31.3 *Concordia Journal* (July 2005): 263.

against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant (בְּרִית).

Malachi 2:14 calls marriage a covenant and a rough literal translation of the Hebrew phrase is “she [is] your covenant wife.” The word for covenant is *berit*, one of the most important words in Old Testament theology, used to describe the Noahic, Abrahamic, and Mosaic covenants (Gen. 9:9 – 17; Gen. 15:18; Exodus 19:5) and God’s covenant with His people Israel. In Malachi 2:14, this word used to describe God’s covenants is applied to marriage, thus elevating the concept of marriage to a new moral height.

Three terms used in Malachi 2:14 forcefully show a very high view of marriage as a covenant is affirmed by God:

“The wife of your youth”

“She is your companion”

“Your wife by covenant”

Walter Kaiser suggests these three phrases illustrate more graphically the offense of divorce.³² The phrase “wife of your youth” reminds the men of the woman who was their first love and the one to whom their devotion was due. Similar language is used in Proverbs 5:18 where men are encouraged to remain sexually faithful to the “wife of their youth.” The Hebrew word translated “companion” by the NASB and “partner” by the NIV is הַבְּרִית and is related to the Hebrew root meaning “to be joined,” as in the nailing together of pieces of wood in a construction project (Exodus 26:6).³³ This verb and its nouns are used for close associates, partners, worshipers, armies, all of which are bound as a unit and share the same

³² Walter Kaiser, *Malachi: God’s Unchanging Love* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 72.

³³ Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 549.

characteristics and goals.³⁴ Malachi 2:14 is the only occurrence of this Hebrew word for “companion” in reference to the wife. A husband and wife are *companions* and share the same goals of serving and glorifying God. Combined with the language of 2:15, Malachi 2:14 – 2:15 may also imply the shared responsibility of child-rearing; we are *companions* in this task.

b. Men are encouraged in the strongest possible terms to remain true to their first wife.

Malachi 2:15 (NIV): Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.

Malachi 2:15 (HCS): Didn't the one [God] make [us] with a remnant of His life-breath? And what does the One seek? A godly offspring. So watch yourselves carefully, and do not act treacherously against the wife of your youth.

Malachi 2:15 urges fidelity to the marriage covenant. Though Malachi 2:15 is difficult to render in English, Malachi is building a moral argument based on creation and is essentially saying that God made monogamous marriage and He intends for unions to last.³⁵ Verhoef summarizes the moral message of Malachi 2:15 by saying, “Somehow v. 15 conveys the deepest motive for being faithful in marriage life, and for the prohibition of mixed marriages [believers and non-believers] and divorce.”³⁶ What is this deepest motive? Faithfulness to God’s original plan for marriage. Markus Zehnder agrees that Malachi 2:15 is theologically grounded in Genesis 1 – 2 and says, “The marriage relation is the realized form of the creational unity

³⁴ Allen P. Ross, *Malachi Then and Now: An Expository Commentary Based on Detailed Exegetical Analysis* (Wooster, OH: Weaver Book Company, 2016), 120 – 121.

³⁵ This is the opinion of Robert Alden, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, *Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 717.

³⁶ Pieter A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, 275.

of man and woman, the dissolution of which would contradict the very essence of this unity."³⁷

B. Marriage is a Covenant Witnessed by God.

Matthew 19:6 (HCS): [Jesus speaking] So they [husband and wife] are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, man must not separate.

When a couple enter into a marriage covenant, God is the unseen witness. In Matthew 19:6 Jesus quotes Genesis 2:24 and then gives his commentary, asserting God is present at every wedding ceremony when he says "God has joined" them together. Even if a couple completely rejects belief in God, God still exists and is present at their wedding and will hold them morally accountable for the choices and promises made. Jesus' statement here in Matthew 19:6 amplifies the covenant language used in reference to marriage in the OT. Marriage is a *common grace*, thus the church has never required non-believers to be married again after conversion: Their marriage when they were not Christians is valid – God was present there. Marriages (heterosexual ones) which are not performed by a Christian ministers are still recognized by the church since God is the unseen witness at the marriage. Couples who are saved after they are married may choose to have a Christian ceremony as a symbol of their desire to serve Christ in their home, but they are legitimately married as non-Christians as long as there is an official departure from the family of origin and a public declaration of the covenant.

C. God Is The Example of a Covenant-Keeper, and our model for keeping the marriage covenant.

³⁷ Markus Zehnder, "A Fresh Look at Malachi 2:10 – 16," *Vetus Testamentum* 53 (2003): 247.

Woven through the tapestry of Scripture is the theme of the LORD God who makes and keeps His covenants. If we want to know what it means to treat marriage as a covenant, then we can look at how God has kept His covenants:

Genesis 9:8 – 17: God established a covenant with Noah and promised never to send another flood that would destroy all of humanity. The rainbow was a symbol of his promise.

Genesis 15 & 17: God made a covenant with Abram [Abraham] to bless all nations through him and that his descendants would be innumerable. See also 1 Chronicles 16:16 – 18. In Psalm 105:8 says God has “remembered his covenant forever” which he made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Exodus 19: God made a covenant with Israel via Moses in which he declared they would be his own possession.

Deuteronomy 4:31: “For the LORD your God is a compassionate God; He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them.” God renewed the covenant with Israel after 40 years of desert wanderings.

2 Samuel 7:8 – 17: God made a covenant with David, promising one of his descendants would reign and God would “establish his throne forever.” (7:13). This is a Messianic promise fulfilled in Jesus.

The New Covenant: Jeremiah 31:27 – 34; Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25; Hebrews 8:7 – 13; Hebrews 9:15. In the New Covenant found in Christ, God has made an unending promise of forgiveness of sins, a new birth, and eternal life for everyone who believes in Christ.

God has kept every one of His covenants. As His followers, we should have the same approach to the covenant of marriage. When someone is saved, the covenant-keeping God takes up residence in his or her life. God the Holy Spirit fills us and gives us the power to keep our covenant of marriage. God's covenant of salvation is permanent – that's why we talk about eternal security. In the same way, we should approach the marriage covenant as permanent.

D. Covenant Language in Genesis 2:24 – 25

Genesis 2:24 – 25 (NASB): For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, but they were not ashamed.

Genesis 2:24 – 25, the foundational passage for marriage in Scripture, uses covenant terms even though it doesn't use the specific word *covenant*. Two specific Hebrew words used in Genesis 2:24 have strong covenant overtones. The terms for "leave" and "cling / cleave" in 2:24 are terms commonly used elsewhere in the OT in the context of a covenant, indicating covenant breach (e.g., Deut. 28:20; Hos. 4:10) or fidelity.³⁸ Genesis 2:24 – 25 uses terms which elsewhere in Scripture are strongly related to the concept of covenant.

1. "Leave" is a word with strong covenant overtones.

Genesis 2:24 (HCS): This is why a man **leaves** his father and mother and bonds with his wife, and they become one flesh.

³⁸ Ken Matthews, *Genesis*, 222.

In Genesis 2:24, the Hebrew word is אָזַב / *'azab*, translated as *leaves* in English, has strong covenant overtones. Victor Hamilton translates *'azab* more forcefully as “forsakes” and says, “The verb *forsake* frequently describes Israel’s rejection of her covenant relationship with Yahweh.”³⁹ Here are two examples:

Jeremiah 1:16 (HCS): I will pronounce My judgments against them for all the evil they did when they abandoned [*'azab*] Me to burn incense to other gods and to worship the works of their own hands.

Jeremiah 2:13 (HCS): For My people have committed a double evil: They have abandoned [*'azab*] Me, the fountain of living water, and dug cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that cannot hold water.

The word *'azab* is also used in Genesis 28:15 in a positive way when God says He *will not leave* Jacob or his family until God fulfills the covenant promises he is making to Jacob.

The use of the word *leave* in Genesis 2:24 also implies that for a marriage to be successful, there must healthy separation from the family of origin. Of course, we are commanded to honor our father and mother, and this does not stop when we become adults. But parents must allow couples to form a new family unit, and it is quite unwise and unhelpful for parents to become overly involved in their child’s new marriage. In very unhealthy situations, parents can even perceive their child’s new spouse as competition for attention rather than a blessed addition to their extended family. Timothy Keller says, “You have failed to leave your parents if you are more driven by their wishes and expectations than by your spouse’s.”⁴⁰ The manner in which a couple *leaves* father and mother may differ according to cultures.

³⁹ Victor Hamilton, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament Genesis 1 – 17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 181.

⁴⁰ Timothy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 140.

2. “Joined to” / “cleave” is a word with strong covenant overtones.

Genesis 2:24 (NASB): For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be **joined to** his wife; and they shall become one flesh.

In Genesis 2:24, the Hebrew word קָבַץ / *dābaq*, translated “cleave” by the KJV and “be joined to” by the NASB, has strong covenant overtones. Victor Hamilton says this verb “often designates the maintenance of the covenant relationship.”⁴¹ Here are four examples of *dābaq* used in covenant contexts:

Deuteronomy 4:4 (ESV): But you who held fast [*dabaq*] to the LORD your God are all alive today.⁴²

Deuteronomy 10:20 (ESV): You shall fear the LORD your God. You shall serve him and hold fast [*dabaq*] to him, and by his name you shall swear.

Deuteronomy 11:22 – 23 (ESV): For if you will be careful to do all this commandment that I command you to do, loving the LORD your God, walking in all his ways, and holding fast [*dabaq*] to him, then the LORD will drive out all these nations before you, and you will dispossess nations greater and mightier than you.

Deuteronomy 13:4 (ESV – Discussing that one should not listen to a false prophet): You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast [*dabaq*] to him.

⁴¹ Victor Hamilton, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament Genesis 1 – 17*, 181.

⁴² The ESV does a good job of consistently translating *dabaq* as “hold fast.”

The implication of the use of the word *dābaq* elsewhere in the OT is that a husband and wife should do everything in their power to maintain the covenant of marriage.

3. Covenant Means Nothing comes between the husband and wife.

The Hebrew word in Genesis 2:24 translated “cleave” by the KJV and “bonds” by the HCS is *dabaq* / דָּבַק. To get an idea of the sort of closeness God intends in a marriage, we can compare the word’s usage in Job 41:15 – 17⁴³ when Job describes the mysterious creature called Leviathan:

¹⁵ His [the Leviathan’s] pride is in his rows of scales,
closely sealed together.

¹⁶ One scale is so close to another
that no air can pass between them.

¹⁷ They are joined (דָּבַק) to one another,
so closely connected they cannot be separated.

In describing the Leviathan, Job 41:15 – 16 says the scales on his back are so close together that no air can pass between them. Then Job 41:17 says the Leviathan’s scales “cleave” together (דָּבַק). So, from this word picture in Job 41, we see that God desires a husband and wife to be so close that *absolutely nothing* comes between them. One point of application is that a covenant marriage means a husband and wife will let nothing split them apart.

Victor Hamilton summarizes the importance of the covenant language implied in the words *’azab* and *dābaq* of Genesis 2:24 and says, “Thus, to leave father and mother and cling to one’s wife means to sever one loyalty and commence another. Already Scripture has sounded the note that marriage is a covenant rather than an ad-hoc, makeshift arrangement.”⁴⁴

⁴³ There is a difference in the numbering of these verses between the Hebrew and English versions: Job 41:15 – 17 in English = Job 41:7 – 9 in Hebrew.

⁴⁴ Victor Hamilton, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament Genesis 1 – 17*, 181.

4. Covenant Means Clinging in Affection and Loyalty

Beyond Genesis 2:24, the word *dabaq* is used elsewhere in the OT in the sense of clinging to someone in affection and loyalty. For example, in Ruth 1:14 the word *dabaq* is used to describe Ruth clinging to Naomi.⁴⁵ The force of Ruth's loyalty to Naomi is beautifully emphasized when Ruth tells Naomi: "Do not urge me to leave (*'azab*) you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." (Ruth 1:16 – 17 KJV) Though these are the words of a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law, they illustrate the type of covenant loyalty which should also be present in a marriage.

E. The Covenant of Marriage is imagery used of the relationship between Christ and the Church.

Ephesians 5:25 – 33 (NASB): ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, ²⁶ so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. ²⁸ So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; ²⁹ for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also *does* the church, ³⁰ because we are members of His body. ³¹ FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. ³² This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. ³³ Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must *see to it* that she respects her husband.

⁴⁵ Earl S. Kalland, "Dabaq," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, Harris, Archer, Waltke, eds. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 178.

The fact that God considers marriage a covenant is strongly reinforced by the analogy made in Ephesians 5:25ff between Christ and his Church and a Husband and his Wife. Husbands are challenged, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her.” Christ is our model and he died for someone else, He died for us. In marriage, we imitate and communicate the Gospel, giving up our rights and even our life for the other person.⁴⁶ The covenant subsisting between Christ and the church is illustrated by the covenant between a husband and wife. Roy Ortlund said, “The reason why people fall in love and get married is because God has/is authoring a love story that puts the Gospel on display.”⁴⁷ As a covenant, a Christian marriage is supposed to proclaim the Gospel to a lost and watching world.

F. Three Aspects to Covenant Marriage in Genesis 2:24 - 25

Kenneth Matthews suggests that as a model for marriage, this passage involves three factors: a leaving, a uniting, and a public declaration.

1. Leaving: There is some debate concerning whether vs. 24 should be translated as a future – “will leave” – or a present tense – “leaves.” Matthews says, “The significance of the language “leave” is that marriage involves a new pledge to a spouse in which formal familial commitments are superseded.”⁴⁸ Notice also the formality: the husband officially leaves his family of origin for the specific purpose of starting a new family unit.

2. Uniting: The Hebrew word translated as “cleave” in Genesis 2:24 is קָבַץ (*dabaq*) and its uses elsewhere in the OT make clear the idea of a marriage *covenant* is in mind here. Matthews says, “The two people, although freed

⁴⁶ Comments here influenced by Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 89, n. 41.

⁴⁷ Roy Ortlund, Sermon at the MBTS 2017 For the Church Conference.

⁴⁸ Kenneth Matthews, *Genesis 1 – 11:26*, New American Commentary, vol. 1a (Nashville: Broadman, 1996), 223.

from their parents, are not isolated or independent; they become dependent and responsible toward one another.”⁴⁹

3. Public Declaration: Matthews says, “Marriage is not a private matter. It involves a declaration of intention and a redefining of obligations and relationships in a familial and social setting. In our contemporary climate of sexual freedom and societal tolerance for moral deviance, we would do well to reconsider the biblical viewpoint toward marriage and sexual behavior. Without question 2:24 serves as the bedrock for Hebrew understanding of the centrality of the nuclear family for the survival of society.”⁵⁰ This point needs clear emphasis: God’s order is as follows:

1. The husband leaves his family of origin.
2. The Groom and Bride establish a covenant. (“Leave” and “cleave”)
3. Then, they experience shameless intimacy (sex).

Marriage requires a public declaration. Exodus 19:8; 24:3; 24:7; Deuteronomy 5:27; and Joshua 24:24 describe five occasions when the Israelites publicly declared their fidelity to the Lord by the terms of a covenant made in the presence of witnesses. Likewise, marriage is a covenant made in the presence of witnesses. As a communally defining act, marriage implies legal force.⁵¹

God created and oversaw the first marriage; and Jesus states that God still brings together and unites all married couples (Matthew 19:6). In addition, since marriage necessarily requires a formation of a new family unit and reorientation of one’s familial commitments, marriage is a social institution. Therefore, marriage should be entered into, and vows spoken, before the families and communities of the couple. Furthermore, a public declaration indicates the seriousness of the couple getting married as it

⁴⁹ Kenneth Matthews, *Genesis 1 – 11:26*, 223.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁵¹ This insight is from former student, Ben Somers.

inherently calls for accountability from those who are standing by to observe the wedding.

G. Marriage is a covenant, but it is not a Sacrament.

Roman Catholicism sees marriage as a Sacrament. Köstenberger and Jones explain, “According to the sacramental model of marriage, it is by participating in this ecclesiastical rite that grace is accrued for the married couple on the basis of the supposition that God dispenses grace through the church and participation in its sacraments.”⁵² The entire notion of “sacraments” which provide grace to the participants is foreign to Scripture. Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. Marriage is not a sacrament.

H. Marriage is a Covenant, Not a Just a Civil Contract

While the Bible teaches marriage is a *covenant*, our culture sees marriage as a *civil contract*: an arrangement which entails an individual’s responsibility to fulfill a task as being conditional upon the actions of the other party in the contractual arrangement: If you do certain things for me, then I will do certain things for you. Contracts are usually made for a limited period of time (think of a professional athlete’s contract), deal with specific actions to be performed, and are sometimes (often?) motivated by a selfish desire to get what one wants. Dennis Hollinger comments on the difference between and contract and covenant and says:

When we sign contracts we do so to protect ourselves, lest the other party default on the promise. But a covenant is a deep, organic bond between two parties, and it embodies not just a legal agreement, but a binding promise of the heart. Thus in wedding ceremonies, vows

⁵² Adreas J. Köstenberger, David Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 82.

constitute a covenant that goes far beyond the marriage license issued by the state. The state contract protects interests and grants rights; the covenant makes a commitment and gives to the other the very core of oneself in the context of a witnessing community that helps enable and hold the couple accountable.⁵³

Marriage is not designed by God to be a *contract* between two individuals, but is supposed to be the joining of two lives in a covenant.⁵⁴

Here are several differences between seeing marriage as a *covenant* as opposed to seeing marriage as a *contract*.

1. Contracts are temporary; covenants are permanent. Permanence versus Impermanence

Contracts are temporary and typically have a time limit; covenants are intended to be permanent, until “death do us part.” Tommy Nelson offers a helpful comment on the permanence of the marriage covenant and says to men, “When you get married, you get measured for your tux and your coffin at the same time. In other words, you are marrying for life, until you are parted by death.”⁵⁵ Stephen and Alex Kendrick echo these thoughts and say, “Seeing marriage as a contract is like saying to your spouse, ‘I take you for me and we’ll see if this works out.’ But realizing it as a covenant changes it to say, ‘I give myself to you and commit to this marriage for life.’”⁵⁶

2. Contracts downplay forgiveness; covenants emphasize forgiveness. Forgiveness versus an Expectation that your spouse won’t sin.

⁵³ Dennis P. Hollinger, *The Meaning of Sex: Christian Ethics and the Moral Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 97.

⁵⁴ It is interesting that Baptist theologian Francis Wayland referred to marriage as a contract: “In the act of marriage, two persons, under the most solemn of circumstances, are thus united; and they enter a mutual contract thus to live in respect to each other.” Francis Wayland, *The Elements of Moral Science*, rev. ed. (New York: Sheldon and Company, 1877), 312.

⁵⁵ Tommy Nelson, *The Book of Romance: What Solomon Says About Love, Sex, and Intimacy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 184.

⁵⁶ Stephen and Alex Kendrick, *The Love Dare*, 197.

In a covenant, we enter the agreement realizing we are marrying a sinner, just as God's covenant of salvation is with us as a sinner. As a result, a covenant entails the forgiveness of sin when our spouse fails us. In contrast, in the contractual model, the stability of the marriage is determined by one's ability *not* to sin. Köstenberger and Jones say, "In essence, the contractual model of marriage bases the security and stability of marriage on the ability of people not to sin. . . . In light of humanity's (including Christians') universal sinfulness, this renders marriage a highly precarious and unstable institution."⁵⁷ While a covenant marriage does not give an irresponsible spouse free reign for unfaithfulness and violent behavior, it does mean that we are prepared to forgive each other of the hurt feelings and offenses that are common to even the best marriages.

3. Contracts do not emphasize the personal virtue of those involved; covenants stress the personal virtue of those involved. Covenants involve virtue and fidelity while personal virtue is not absolutely necessary in a contract.

Part of giving the "core of oneself" in a covenant involves moral virtue and fidelity to standards of morality. In a covenant, moral obligations are present which are not usually requisite to a contract. For example, a rental lease (a contract) does not require me to be honest, true, virtuous, and live a life of integrity. As long as I pay my rent on time and honor tenant stipulations, there are no problems. However, a covenant requires two people to maintain lives of virtue in an effort to maintain *a relationship*, and not just keep the terms of a "contract."

4. Contracts do not require relational intimacy; A Covenant requires relational intimacy.

⁵⁷ Andreas Kösteberger and David Jones, *God, Marriage, & Family* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 84.

While contracts can be employed with relational detachment and still continue, marriage covenants cannot.⁵⁸ We must not miss the intimacy of Genesis 2:25, “They were naked and not ashamed.” This reflects the deepest openness and intimacy a man and woman can have. Again, in the Fall of Genesis 3, Adam and Eve reached for autonomy and self-rule, but for marriage to succeed this autonomy must be surrendered. The openness and transparency of sexual intimacy is a symbol of the unity which is the goal and the autonomy which is surrendered. The lack of embarrassment of the unclad body between the husband and wife symbolizes that there is nothing between the husband and wife, nothing “hidden” – rather, there is total acceptance of each by the other person and the surrender of autonomy is accompanied by the exclusive expression of sensual touch.

5. Contracts place my needs first; covenants place the needs of the relationship first. In a Covenant, the good of the relationship comes before my own “needs.”

A covenant is fundamentally *not* a self-centered agreement. Timothy Keller differentiates a contract from a covenant in that a contract protects the rights of an individual, while in a covenant “the good of the relationship takes precedence over the immediate needs of the individual.”⁵⁹ A contract is *self-serving* while a covenant comes with an unlimited responsibility towards the good of the relationship.

As we saw in Genesis 3, the central aspect of the Fall was grasping at human autonomy and the desire to rule on our own apart from God. But for a marriage to be successful, *autonomy* must in fact be surrendered. In marriage, I surrender what I want in favor of what we want. Marriage is not defined by my preferences and wishes; it is no longer what is good for *me* but what is good for *us*.

⁵⁸ My thoughts here are influenced by two papers submitted by former students in the Spring of 2016, Michael Riley and Kaylan Paxton.

⁵⁹ Timothy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment With the Wisdom of God* (New York: Penguin Group, 2011), 83.

6. Contracts do not require holiness; covenants require holiness. A Covenant entails holiness while a contract does not.

God sees marriage as a covenant and holds us morally accountable to keep our wedding promises. Because marriage is a covenant, marriage is *holy*. That's why we refer to marriage as "*holy* matrimony." To say your mate is "holy" doesn't mean that he or she is perfect. Holiness means your husband or your wife is set apart for a higher purpose – he or she is no longer common or everyday but special and unique. Stephen and Alex Kendrick say, "A person who has become holy to you has a place no one can rival in your heart. He or she is sacred to you, a person to be honored, praised, and defended."⁶⁰ When you marry, your spouse becomes holy to you. No other person in the world deserves the same level of commitment, respect, honor, and attention. The relationship you share as husband and wife is like no other.

7. Contracts assume a level of distrust; covenants are based on trust. Trust versus Distrust

Stephen and Alex Kendrick comment that a contract is usually a written agreement based on the potential for mistrust, outlining stipulations and consequences if broken. In contrast, a covenant is "based on trust, assuring someone that your promise is unconditional and good for life. It is spoken before God out of love for another."⁶¹

8. Contracts are individualistic; Covenants assume a Community of Faith.

As one additional word: A covenant implies a community of faith to while a contract is individualistic. A contractual view of marriage fits our culture's advocacy of moral autonomy. Some Christians have gone so far

⁶⁰ Stephen Kendrick and Alex Kendrick, *The Love Dare* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2008), 72. The Kendricks add that the way a bride treats her wedding dress in the years to follow is a good illustration of holiness. In the USA, women often preserve their wedding dress, covering and protecting it and setting it apart from everything else in the closet. A bride does not wear her wedding dress in the yard or just to go on a date. It has a value all its own and in this way is "sacred" or "holy" to her. Marriage should be treated the same way.

⁶¹ Stephen Kendrick and Alex Kendrick, *The Love Dare*, 196.

in the emphasis on a community of faith in marriage as to disparage “destination weddings.” Some suggest that in a destination wedding the church is excluded; it is not a community act, but a show-piece for the couple. While this may be true in some cases, I think this is an oversimplified and hasty reaction. A destination wedding can also be an opportunity for the two families to join together and acknowledge the beginning of a new covenant with the most important people present. A public announcement or perhaps a pleasant after-church reception when the couple returns from the honeymoon is more than sufficient to have the entire body included. My biggest critique of *some* destination weddings is the cost. Families and young couples are expending lots of money on weddings.

I. Marriage as a School for Character

Genesis 2:24-25 reminds us that marriage is a school for character. Warren Wiersbe comments, “As two people live together in holy matrimony, the experience either brings out the best in them or the worst in them. It’s an opportunity to exercise faith, hope, and love to mature in sacrifice and service to one another for God’s glory.”⁶² This approach is in stark contrast to the modern approach too frequently sees problems as an excuse to end a marriage.⁶³

VI. Marriage Should Be Consensual

Marriage should be consensual. Both parties in marriage, the bride and the groom, should enter into marriage of their own free will, and not under coercion. No one should be coerced into marriage against his or her will.

⁶² Warren Wiersbe, *Be Basic: Genesis 1 – 11* (Colorado Springs: Victor, 1998), 43.

⁶³ Mark Liederbach of SEBTS says the primary purpose of marriage is to fulfill the divinely given task “that the glory of God may be known throughout the earth. In His grace, God indicates that a husband and wife are to “leave,” “cleave,” and become “one flesh” so that humans can attain to, and encourage in others, the full expression of what they were made for: the worship and glory of God.” Mark Liederbach, “Marriage as Worship,” A Paper Delivered at the 67th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society Meeting in Atlanta, GA Nov. 17 – 19, 2015, 7 -8.

A. Rebecca's Consent was sought

The consensual nature of marriage is emphasized when Rebecca's consent was sought before she was given to Isaac in marriage. In Genesis 24, Abraham's servant goes to find a bride for Isaac. After meeting Rebecca and giving her wonderful gifts of gold jewelry, there is some negotiation between Abraham's servant and Laban. Eventually, Abraham's servant asks to return to take Rebecca to Isaac. An interesting exchange then takes place, and Rebecca's family says, "We will call the young woman and ask her." (Genesis 24:57) Then, Rebecca's family has this exchange with her, "Then they called Rebekah and said to her, "Will you go with this man?" And she said, "I will go." (Genesis 24:58) Rebecca's consent to the marriage is clearly being sought here. The Bible's example is that the woman must consent to the marriage. Traditions which sell off daughters to the highest bidder emerge from paganism, not from the Biblical worldview.

B. Consent is advocated in the old statements of faith.

Older statements of faith emphasized the mutual consent necessary for a marriage. Article XXIV in the Westminster Confession of Faith ("Of Marriage and Divorce") says, "It is lawful for all sorts of people to marry who are able with judgment to give their consent."⁶⁴ The Calvinistic Baptist Second London Confession repeated this line verbatim from the Westminster Confession.⁶⁵ The fact that marriage requires the consent of both parties means young children may not be married off by unscrupulous parents. A child does not have the developmental capacity to give consent to marriage.

⁶⁴ *The Westminster Confession*, XXIV.3.

⁶⁵ *The Second London Confession*, XXV.3.

Child marriage and giving of child brides is still a problem in many parts of the world. A parent who gives a young girl in marriage to an older man is submitting his or her child to sexual assault – a grievous and wretched sin. Christian pastors and missionaries should fight child marriage with every fiber of their being.

The condition that marriage is consensual means both the bride and the groom freely enter into a marriage. Neither force nor coercion is used to bully someone into a marriage which is not truly desired. It is quite right to decline some marriage proposals.

VII. Whom Should I Marry?

A defining, practical question for many Christians is, “Whom should I marry?” Or, “Should I marry the person for whom I currently feel extremely strong attraction?” This information is provided to help you keep from marrying a “jerk” or a “jerkette.” For our purposes, a jerk / jerkette can be defined as a person who is resistant to change: a pattern keeps resurfacing and the person is not willing really to work at altering characteristics which keep upsetting the relationship.⁶⁶ In *Henry VI*, Shakespeare reminds us, “Yet hasty marriage seldom proveth well.”⁶⁷ Many single people say something like, “Oh, I’ve just got to have *somebody!*” But as a word of caution, singles should remember that having *nobody* is better than having the *wrong-body*.⁶⁸

A. No Biblical Concept of “Soul-Mate”

Before deciding about the person to marry, we need to eliminate a myth which is quite misleading. A popular idea in our culture is that each person has one “soul mate,” another human being who will complete us and make us happy and fulfilled. The idea has origins in Pre-Christian

⁶⁶ This definition is from John Van Epp, *How To Avoid Falling For a Jerk (or Jerkette)*, Instructor Manual, 17.

⁶⁷ *Henry VI*, 4.1.19.

⁶⁸ Dr. Eddie Bumpers, Pastor of Crossway Baptist Church, Springfield, MO, MBTS Chapel February 22, 2023.

paganism and Greek philosophy, is foreign to Scripture and does not originate in the Bible. If you have been on a search for your soul mate, stop! Keep in mind the earlier point that marriage was created with redemption in mind. Whomever you marry (if marriage is God's will for you), you can be certain that you will be marrying a sinner who will need lots of forgiveness.

The wrongheaded concept of a "soul mate" originates in Plato's *Symposium*, a fictional account of a drinking party. Plato uses an otherwise unknown character named Apollodorus to narrate what had happened at an all-male drinking party in the distant past. The topic for discussion at this party had been "love" and what makes people fall in love. Among several speakers in the *Symposium*, one is a well-known Athenian playwright named Aristophanes, who gives an extended praise for love ("eros"). Aristophanes claims present-day humans are each half of an original whole. This original whole is comically described as round, eight-limbed, four-eared, and so on. According to the story, these original humans were one of three genders: All male, all female, or "androgynous" – half male and half female. These original wholes were subsequently cut in half by Zeus to curb their ambitions. Once separated, the halves desire nothing more than to be reunited. Thus, a man who looks for a woman to love is supposedly searching for the other half of an androgynous original. Likewise, homosexual males are searching for the other half of an original male whole and homosexual females are searching for the other half of an original female whole. Aristophanes summarizes this bizarre story and says, "This, then, is the source of our desire to love each other. Love is born into every human being; it calls back the halves of our original nature together; it tries to make one out of two and heal the wound of human nature."⁶⁹ The

⁶⁹ Plato, *The Symposium*, in *Plato: Complete Works*, John M. Cooper, ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997), 474.

“other half” is the soul-mate one should seek to make one’s self whole and is an idea that is counter to Scripture.

Another fallen human being can never complete us. To expect another fallen human to “make us whole” is to engage in idolatry, placing a created being before the Creator. Only Jesus Christ can offer us the type of wholeness for which we crave. Yet Christ’s mission was not to fulfill modern categories of wholeness derived from pop-psychology, but to make provision for the redemption of men from sin. Colossians 1:22 says, “But now He has reconciled you by His physical body through His death, to present you holy, faultless, and blameless before Him.” God’s desire is to make us whole by making us *holy*. Likewise, when Christians are looking for a spouse, our primary goal should be to seek someone who shares a desire for holiness.

I have often been asked by students at my school a question similar to this: “Is there only one person I’m supposed to marry? What if I marry the wrong person?” The Bible does not use this line of reasoning to talk about marriage. The Bible emphasizes choosing a fellow believer for a spouse (2 Corinthians 6:14 – 15), warns us not associate with hot-headed, angry people (Proverbs 22:24-9, and stresses that marriage is the uniting of one man and one woman in covenant commitment for a lifetime (Genesis 2:24 – 25; Malachi 2:14; Matthew 19:6). The Bible also acknowledges the spark of attraction and romance that occurs when a man and woman are attracted to each other (Song of Songs 1:15 – 17). In short, a Biblical romance is not an endless pursuit for a “soul mate,” but is a commitment to one person as your **sole** mate.

B. Believers Should Marry Believers

The clear and consistent Biblical teaching is that believers should marry believers. A text of critical importance at this point is 2 Corinthians 6:14 – 18:

¹⁴ Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?¹⁵ Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? ¹⁶ Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said,

“I WILL DWELL IN THEM AND WALK AMONG THEM;
AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE.

¹⁷ “Therefore, COME OUT FROM THEIR MIDST AND BE SEPARATE,” says the Lord. “AND DO NOT TOUCH WHAT IS UNCLEAN; And I will welcome you.

¹⁸ “And I will be a father to you,
And you shall be sons and daughters to Me,”
Says the Lord Almighty.

2 Corinthians 6:14 contains a very interesting verb – the present active participle of ἐτεροζυγέω. The verb is not found elsewhere in Biblical Greek nor in Greek literature prior to the Christian era. Renowned Greek scholar Murray J. Harris comments on the verb and says, “Literally it means “pull the yoke” [ζυγος] in a different [ετερος] direction than one’s fellow,” and figuratively, “make a mismatched covenant,” “mismatch.”⁷⁰

For single Christians, the upshot of 1 Corinthians 6:14 – 18 is that missionary dating is an extremely bad idea. Missionary dating can be defined as becoming romantically involved with someone who is not a Christ-follower in the hopes that during the relationship the person will be

⁷⁰ Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 498.

born again or renew a long-dormant faith. While there are anecdotal examples of occasions where such a strategy resulted in a happy marriage, one should mark such blissful stories as examples of God's kindness to humans who violate His word. The principle in Scripture is clear: Believers are to marry unbelievers.

The idea that we should marry another believer is also taught in 1 Corinthians 7:39, "A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord." Notice that Paul says the one characteristic a widow should search for in a future husband is that they marry "in the Lord," meaning they are both believers. But also notice that Paul says they should marry "whom she wishes." It is morally acceptable to marry someone you actually want to marry! If you have no desire to marry the person, then strike him or her off the list.

If a Christian marries an unbeliever, there are two negative results. First, a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever will never achieve the spiritual oneness God desires – or which the Christian genuinely wants. Marriage is the deepest relationship into which two human beings can enter. God designed marriage to be an intimate, spiritual union – not only physical, emotional, intellectual, and social, but spiritual. If a Christian marries a non-believer, the Christian is marrying someone who does not have a renewed nature, is still dead in his or her trespasses and sins, and does not have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Second, when children come, tension is immediately introduced into the home because the Christian parent will want to raise the children in the Lord, and the unbeliever may be hostile such things. John R. W. Stott says that an unequally yoked home makes "the distinctively Christian nurture [children] should be receiving from both parents impossible."⁷¹

⁷¹ John R.W. Stott, *Basic Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 119.

Christian singles should be acutely aware of the fact that Christian virtue is quite attractive to lost people when they are searching for a mate. Some non-believers are quite adept at feigning interest in Christ in order to convince a Christian to entertain a proposal of marriage. Bunyan describes the character of a lost person who pretends to be a Christian in order to seduce a genuine Christian. In the second half of *Pilgrim's Progress*, a young lady named Mercy is on her way to Heaven when she encounters a gadabout town named "Mr. Brisk." Bunyan says:

Now by that these pilgrims had been at this place a week, Mercy had a visitor that pretended some good will unto her, and his name was Mr. Brisk, a man of some breeding, and that pretended to religion, but a man that stuck very close to the world. So he came once or twice or more to Mercy and offered love unto her. Now Mercy was of fair countenance and therefore the more alluring.⁷²

Mercy's Christian character and fair countenance made her very attractive to a non-Christian. Christian singles, the same is true today. Your devotion to Christ and the virtues that flow from a heart surrendered to Christ are so rare in this vulgar world that you will stand out as a beautiful sapphire in a field of gravel. Many people will be attracted to the virtue Christ brings to your life, but they want no part of Christ Himself. Remember Proverbs 4:23 (HCS): "Guard your heart above all else, for it is the source of life."

Christians should be aware that holiness and purity in a Christian's life can be attractive to the natural senses of an unconverted person, causing the lost person to praise a Christian for his or her virtue. Such praise can be misleading to the Christian, causing him or her to think, "Oh, he likes my devotion to Christ. He must be a Christian." Along these lines, the American preacher Jonathan Edwards actually gives a word of caution. In distinguishing between true and false signs of genuine conversion,

⁷² John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress* (New York: Signet Books, 2009), 217.

Edwards noted that unconverted people often find the Gospel and Biblical truth attractive not because they are convicted of God's holiness and the depth of their sin, but because they find Biblical truth beneficial to themselves in some way. Regarding the fact some unconverted people actually agree to a degree with Christian doctrines of sin and virtue, Edwards says:

All natural men's [unconverted people] hatred of sin, is as much from principles of nature, as men's hatred of a tiger for his rapaciousness, or their aversion to a serpent for his poison and hurtfulness: and all their love of Christian virtue, is from no higher principle than their love of a man's good nature, which appears amiable to men; but no otherwise than silver and gold appear amiable in the eyes of a merchant, or than the blackness of the soil is beautiful to the eyes of the farmer.⁷³

Indeed, an unconverted person may see a Christian's virtue and personal holiness as valuable in the same way that he or she sees gold and silver as valuable. It takes great discernment to determine if someone loves you because of what Christ has done in your life and perceives that your Christian character can be beneficial to them, or if the potential mate first loves Jesus Christ and desires to share his or her life with a fellow disciple of Jesus.

C. Yes, you should love the person you are going to marry!

Yes, you should be in love with the person you are going to marry.

In recent years, a number of Christian speakers and authors have made comments strongly critical of falling in love and then getting married. These brothers and sisters forcefully insist such an approach to marriage has its origins in the Romantic Movement and is not the way the Bible describes the process of choosing whom to marry. Some of these speakers

⁷³ Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), 277. I disagree quite strongly with Edwards concerning how one knows if he or she is loved by God, but that is a topic for another place.

and authors become quite dour when describing the silly antics of young Christians who fall in love and get married only to regret doing so later. But mercy, these “anti-love” interpreters make going to the altar to get married sound like a joyless, hapless duty! Good grief brothers and sisters: Just because the world does goofy things because of love doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be in love with the person you choose to marry!

Christians critical of falling in love and getting married are correct at one point: Our culture is infused with highly romanticized views of love. The sort of love which drives people to marriage is overwhelming, all-consuming and full of intoxicating emotions. Sometimes, people think that if they have enough love for each other, they will never encounter any problems or disagreements in marriage. Thus, when the inevitable disagreement comes along, their shallow view of love leads them to think, “Oh no, if we really loved each other, we wouldn’t have any problems! Maybe I’ve married the wrong person!”

From a Biblical perspective, marriage is grounded not so much in *feelings* of love but in the *practice* of love.⁷⁴ In 1 Corinthians 13:4 - 7, Paul gives us the famous description of love:

Love is patient, love is kind *and* is not jealous; love does not brag *and* is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong *suffered*, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁷⁴ Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 374. The unbelieving world is cynical about love. Atheist H.L. Mencken said, “Love is the delusion that one woman differs from another.” *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), 619.

Do you notice in this passage how love is described in definite and identifiable acts? Love doesn't get easily provoked. Love doesn't keep a close list of wrong acts committed by one's spouse. Love rejoices in the truth.

This is Dr. Branch's pastoral advice. I certainly hope you are in love with the person you are marrying! Enjoy the honeymoon experience and all the thrills that come with it. Be ridiculously intoxicated with being in each other's presence and spoil each other with all the affection you can stand! But keep in mind that in the long run it is the deeper love described in 1 Corinthians 13:4 – 7 which builds a lasting and happy marriage, the love that emerges from a will surrendered to Christ which loves the other person when all of his or her flaws become evident.

D. Five Questions to Ask About A Person's Walk With Christ While Dating

1. Does this person have a daily quiet time with the Lord?

Tommy Nelson says, "Few spiritual disciplines are as revealing as this one. If a person has a daily quiet time with the Lord – to read the Scriptures and communicate with the Lord in prayer – then that person is putting himself into a position to be led and directed by the Lord on a daily basis."⁷⁵

2. Is this person actively attending and involved with a local Christian Church?

3. Does this person desire to pursue the same type of spiritual life and ministry that you desire to pursue?

⁷⁵ Tommy Nelson, *The Book of Romance*, 44.

4. Is he or she a tither? If someone is not willing to give financially to support the cause of Christ, it is doubtful he or she will make living for Christ a priority.

5. Does this person demonstrate the fruits of the Spirit?

E. Some Warning Signs to Consider

It may be easier to identify traits which are “deal-breakers”: If the person has these characteristics, then mark him or her off of your list. I’ve modified and expanded a list from different sources with some additions of my own. **The best indicator of how someone will act after he or she is married is the way that person acts before getting married.**

1. He or She is Abusive

The first and most obvious warning sign that you should not marry someone is physical abuse. If the person you are considering marrying ever engages in any physical abuse, immediately stop the relationship. Remember, physical abuse is a crime. Ladies, if a man is physically abusive prior to marriage, he will be physically abusive after marriage. Quite often, verbal abuse is a precursor to physical abuse, with the abusing person insulting or threatening you. Pastor Tommy Nelson amplifies my thoughts and says, “If you experience any abusive behavior whatsoever in your dating relationship – verbal, emotional, physical, or sexual – get out of the relationship as quickly as you can. Abusive behavior does not disappear over time; if anything, it intensifies, and its eruptions have increasingly catastrophic results. . . . You should feel 100 percent safe in the presence of the person you are dating *at all times.*”⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Tommy Nelson, *The Book of Romance: What Solomon Says About Love, Sex, and Intimacy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 32.

2. He or she is a drug abuser.

It is terribly unwise to marry someone who is a drug abuser. Alcohol and drug use are strongly correlated with many of the negative traits already addressed in this list. Abusive behavior, anger, violence, and vulgar language are all part of the daily experience of living with a drug abuser. Proverbs 23:21 says, “For drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags.” Marrying a substance abuser means you will share in all the negative consequences, including poverty, of the abuser’s lifestyle.

3. He or She Has a Track Record of Promiscuity.

Marrying someone who is promiscuous sets you up for heartache and disappointment. Scripture praises and celebrates sexual purity. 1 Corinthians 6:18 (NKJV) says, “Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body.” A person who lacks sexual restraint prior to marriage is not likely suddenly to become a faithful husband or wife. Long-established patterns of behavior are the best indicator of future behavior. Furthermore, promiscuous behavior demonstrates a serious lack of self-control. Self-control is one of the fruits of the Spirit (5:22 – 23). Thus, promiscuous person *is not* under the Holy Spirit’s control.

4. He’s lazy and won’t work.

Ladies, if the man in whom you are interested is lazy and won’t find a job or work now, putting a wedding ring on his hand won’t change that flaw in his character. Proverbs 15:19 says, “The way of the lazy is as a hedge of thorns, But the path of the upright is a highway.” Allen Ross comments on this verse and says, “Diligence normally determines progress in life. This proverb says that the slothful person seems to find obstacles along the way – his way is like a hedge of thorns.”⁷⁷ Proverbs 19:15 adds,

⁷⁷ Allen P. Ross, *Proverbs*, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 997.

“Laziness casts into a deep sleep, and an idle man will suffer hunger.” Ladies, if you marry a lazy man, you will suffer hunger right along with him. Dave Willis rightly says, “He should desire to be a provider, not a freeloader!”⁷⁸ If he won’t work, mark him off your list!

5. He or She is a Liar.

The habit of lying is a character flaw and is a good indicator of larger problems in the person’s life. In John 8:44, Jesus said Satan himself is the father of lies. If the person you are dating habitually lies, he or she is siding with the devil. Proverbs 14:25 adds, “A truthful witness saves lives, But he who utters lies is treacherous.” So let’s be clear: if the person with whom you claim to be in love is a liar, the Bible says this person is siding with Satan and is treacherous. If this person will lie to you before you are married, he or she will lie to you after you are married when the stakes are much higher as your lives and fortunes are joined together and you seek to raise children together. Furthermore, your marriage will be characterized by mistrust since you will never be quite sure if your spouse is telling you the truth.

6. “I am a victim.”

If your potential mate always sees himself or herself as a victim when things don’t go his or her way, mark the person off the list. Victimology can be defined as nurturing an unfocused strain of resentment rooted in a defeatist identity through which all realities are filtered, rather than viewing challenges in life as opportunities to be an overcomer.⁷⁹ You want someone who overcomes obstacles, doesn’t get bitter, and doesn’t make

⁷⁸ Dave Willis, “7 Signs You Should Not Marry Him,” November 19, 2016, accessed March 16, 2017, [http://sixseeds.patheos.com/davewillis/7-signs-you-should-not-marry-him/?utm_source=\[!\]%20Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=NL%20Best%20of%20Patheos%20%20\[Final%20Combo\]&utm_content=13871](http://sixseeds.patheos.com/davewillis/7-signs-you-should-not-marry-him/?utm_source=[!]%20Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=NL%20Best%20of%20Patheos%20%20[Final%20Combo]&utm_content=13871).

⁷⁹ I didn’t make a note about the source of some of this definition for victimology.

excuses. Ladies, if your man always whines when things don't go his way, he's not headed anywhere you want to go.⁸⁰

People who adopt a victim mindset find it difficult to admit mistakes. In many cases, claiming victim status is a way to avoid admitting one's own mistakes. A person who has a hard time admitting his or her mistakes in other situations will be very likely not to admit his or her mistakes in a marriage.

7. He or she is vulgar

If the person you are seeing has a dirty mind and a dirty mouth, mark them off of the list. Jesus said, "The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart." (Luke 6:45, NIV) If a person constantly uses profanity and vulgarity, it is an external sign that profanity and vulgarity reign in his or her heart. The late Adrian Rogers talked about dirty speech and said, "What's down in the well comes up in the bucket."

8. He or She Looks at Pornography. The potential mate "checks out" other men or women.

If the person you are dating gawks at other men/women (as the case may be) and looks at porn, drop him or her immediately. Ladies, if he doesn't respect you enough to keep his eyes on you, then he won't keep his heart with you either.⁸¹

9. Ladies: He avoids responsibility.

⁸⁰ Dave Willis, "7 Signs You Should Not Marry Him," November 19, 2016, accessed March 16, 2017, [http://sixseeds.patheos.com/davewillis/7-signs-you-should-not-marry-him/?utm_source=\[!\]%20Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=NL%20Best%20of%20Patheos%20%20\[Final%20Combo\]&utm_content=13871](http://sixseeds.patheos.com/davewillis/7-signs-you-should-not-marry-him/?utm_source=[!]%20Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=NL%20Best%20of%20Patheos%20%20[Final%20Combo]&utm_content=13871).

⁸¹ Ibid.

Real men accept the responsibility of being a spiritual leader, a man of integrity, and a hard worker. If he is 30 years old, living in mom's basement, and more concerned about playing video games than building a career, leave him immediately. Responsibility is a prerequisite to manhood, and if he doesn't want it, then he's forfeiting the right to become a husband and father someday.⁸² Ladies, you want a man who is going to love you as Christ loved the church: that requires him to be a man of responsibility.

10. He or She is Disrespectful to other people.

Does your boyfriend/girlfriend constantly badmouth his/her boss, coach, parents, pastor, platoon leader, company commander, or any other authority figure in life? Someone who doesn't know how to give respect will rarely become a person worthy of respect. Someone who is constantly critical of other people is showing you more about his or her character than the people they are criticizing.⁸³

11. Is he or she a hothead, someone who becomes quickly angry?

If the person you are seeing has a quick temper and is easily angered, mark them off your list. Proverbs 29:22 (NASB) says, "An angry man stirs up strife, and a hot-tempered man abounds in transgression." The inability to control one's temper reflects a deeper problem regarding a lack of self-control in general. Sooner or later, someone who gets angry very quickly will get themselves in trouble . . . and you in trouble as well. If your boyfriend/girlfriend is quick to get angry, it's not a sign of passionate

⁸² Dave Willis, "7 Signs You Should Not Marry Him," November 19, 2016, accessed March 16, 2017, [http://sixseeds.patheos.com/davewillis/7-signs-you-should-not-marry-him/?utm_source=\[!\]%20Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=NL%20Best%20of%20Patheos%20%20\[Final%20Combo\]&utm_content=13871](http://sixseeds.patheos.com/davewillis/7-signs-you-should-not-marry-him/?utm_source=[!]%20Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=NL%20Best%20of%20Patheos%20%20[Final%20Combo]&utm_content=13871).

⁸³ Dave Willis, "7 Signs You Should Not Marry Him," November 19, 2016, accessed March 16, 2017, [http://sixseeds.patheos.com/davewillis/7-signs-you-should-not-marry-him/?utm_source=\[!\]%20Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=NL%20Best%20of%20Patheos%20%20\[Final%20Combo\]&utm_content=13871](http://sixseeds.patheos.com/davewillis/7-signs-you-should-not-marry-him/?utm_source=[!]%20Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=NL%20Best%20of%20Patheos%20%20[Final%20Combo]&utm_content=13871).

conviction; it's a sign of immaturity and recklessness.⁸⁴ An angry and volatile temperament is not consistent with the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Matthew Henry wisely points out, "Undue anger is a sin which is the cause of many sins; it not only hinders men from calling upon God's name, but it occasions their swearing, and cursing, and profaning God's name."⁸⁵ Furthermore, a man with an angry temperament is more prone to physical violence and abuse.

You should not marry if you think your future spouse can fix you or you can change your future spouse.

Remember: What is that tingly feeling you get when you meet someone to whom you're really attracted but who fails all of these categories? That's common sense leaving your body! Furthermore, be careful of the "in love" experience which can blind us to another person's faults. Puritan pastor Richard Baxter said, "To say you love, but know not why, is more beseeming children or mad folks, than those that are soberly entering upon a change of life [marriage] of so great importance to them."⁸⁶ Presbyterian pastor Timothy Keller adds, "It is possible to feel you are "madly in love" with someone, when it is really just an attraction to someone who can meet your needs and address the insecurities and doubts you have about yourself."⁸⁷

I would like to add a final word from Tommy Nelson concerning when or if a young person is ready to marry:

If you are thinking: Well, I want to get married, but if this doesn't work out as I hope it will, I'll bail out; if you are thinking, We've come this far and I'm afraid I'll embarrass myself by backing out, even though I have serious questions about whether I can fulfill my marriage vow; if you are

⁸⁴ Dave Willis, "7 Signs You Should Not Marry Him."

⁸⁵ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary*, vol. 3, *Job to Song of Solomon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 792.

⁸⁶ Richard Baxter, *A Christian Directory* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1996, fifth printing), 401.

⁸⁷ Timothy Keller with Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 77.

thinking, *I love this woman, and I want to be with her as long as our love lasts*; or if you are thinking, *I'm not sure whether a person can be faithful to another person all his or her life, but I'll be faithful as long as I can be*, you are not ready to marry. You are desiring a sexual affair, not a marriage.⁸⁸

The best indicator of how someone will act after he or she is married is the way that person acts before getting married. Here is a prayer you may consider offering to God:

Dear Loving Father:

I ask for your will and your guidance in my choice of a mate. Please give me someone who loves Jesus Christ and has a desire to serve him. I surrender my wants and emotions to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in this matter. I pray you will grant me a love for my chosen one, and I ask that he / she would love me as well. I ask you to develop patience and self-control in my life as I seek your will in this manner. I ask for your providential guidance to keep me from a relationship which would be harmful to me or lessen my love for you. I ask for special guidance over my emotions as I seek your will.

In Jesus' Name

Your Obedient Servant

F. When Should I Marry?

Christians should marry when they are of an appropriate age consistent with the laws of the state, are exercising reasonable maturity to be expected of a husband or a wife, and are unified in their decision to

⁸⁸ Tommy Nelson, *The Book of Romance*, 72.

marry, believing God has brought them together.⁸⁹ With some caution, I suggest the minimum age of eighteen.

Once a man and woman have agreed that they want to marry each other, there is no specified amount of time for an engagement to last. I do not think excessively long engagements are healthy.⁹⁰ Seek the Lord's will and ask the Holy Spirit to show you the right timing.

Christians throughout history have wrestled with how to handle the questions related to when to get married. For example, in Calvin's Geneva, there were strict rules related to the timing of marriage, and the law penalized engagements which lasted too long. Normally, once a Genevan couple got engaged there was little time to wait for the wedding. Neither their publicly announced engagement nor the civil registration of their marriage was sufficient to constitute a marriage. A formal church wedding had to follow—within six weeks of engagement. If the couple procrastinated in their wedding plans, they would be reprimanded by the Consistory; if they persisted, they would be “sent before the Council so that they may be compelled to celebrate it.” Engagements involving a newcomer to the city were not valid until the parties produced proof of the newcomer's integrity of character and eligibility for marriage. Absent such proof, the couple had to wait a year before they could marry. The 1546 Marriage Ordinance of Geneva set the age of consent for males at 20 and females at age 18. Calvin believed all marriages should be voluntary and

⁸⁹ According W.V. Harris of Columbia University, the average age of marriage for girls in the Roman Empire was at 15. W. V. Harris, “Child-Exposure in the Roman Empire,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 84 (1994): 13. Throughout church history, there have been different opinions about the best age for marriage. For example, Martin Luther said, “a young man should marry at the age of twenty at the latest, a young woman at fifteen to eighteen; that's when they are still in good health and best suited for marriage.” (!!) Martin Luther, “The Estate of Marriage,” *Luther's Works*, vol. 45, Walther I. Brandt, ed. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), 48. I do not want my daughters married at age 15 nor should any other father!! But in our culture, I do feel young people often wait far too long, and by delaying marriage indefinitely set themselves up for strong sexual temptation.

⁹⁰ There are always exceptions. Harry and Bess Truman romanced each other for years and years, before getting married in their 30s, and they then lived happily together for over fifty years.

not coerced. But even after children reached the age of consent, they should still consider and be governed by the advice of their fathers.⁹¹

G. When A Treasured Romance Ends

There are many occasions when a young man or woman meets, and one of them falls madly in love with the other, but sometimes the love isn't reciprocated. Christians are not immune from such heartbreaks: just because we believe the Bible and pray doesn't mean we are free from the unfilled longing and deep yearning for another person who doesn't love us in return. What should we do with such feelings? Corrie Ten Boom was deeply in love with a man named Karel, yet Karel married another woman. After Karel had surprised the Ten Boom family by showing up unannounced with his fiancée in tow, Corrie Ten Boom's father, Casper Ten Boom, gave her very wise advice as she lay weeping on her bed:

Corrie . . . do you know what hurts so very much? It's love. Love is the strongest force in the world, and when it is blocked that means pain. There are two things we can do when this happens. We can kill the love so that it stops hurting. But then, of course, part of us dies too. Or, Corrie, we can ask God to open up another route for that love to travel. God loves Karel – even more than you do – and if you ask Him, He will give you His love for this man, a love nothing can prevent, nothing can destroy. Whenever we cannot love in the old, human way, Corrie, God can give us the perfect way.⁹²

This is Godly advice from a Christian father. When a treasured romance doesn't result in the hoped-for marriage, we must release the person to God and God's perfect love.

⁹¹ This paragraph is drawn directly from John Witte, "Honor Thy Father and Mother? Child Marriage and Parental Consent in Calvin's Geneva," *The Journal of Religion* 86.4 (January 1, 2006): 584.

⁹² Corrie Ten Boom, *The Hiding Place* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour Publishing, 1971), 48.

H. We are dating and we have gotten pregnant: Should we get married?

Now she's feelin' sick in the mornin's; She can't get into her jeans.
I spent my last ten dollars, bought her a second hand ring.

Bob McDill, *Rake and Ramblin' Man*

Christian sexual ethics insists that sex is designed for marriage. As C.S. Lewis said in *Mere Christianity*, "Chastity is the most unpopular of the Christian virtues. There is no getting away from it: the old Christian rule is, 'Either marriage with complete faithfulness to your partner, or else total abstinence.'"⁹³ The fact is that many Christians choose to have premarital sex anyway. It is not uncommon for a Christian couple who are dating to become pregnant. I have not seen any ethics textbooks address this specific situation, so I'll do my very best. I've had lots of experience with people whom I care about very dearly who became pregnant out of wedlock or were the child of such a pregnancy. My purpose here is to offer pastoral advice for real situations that pastors and Christians encounter.

Christians seem to reflect the general trend in the United States and are waiting until they are older to get married. Waiting for a longer period to get married lengthens the time for premarital abstinence and increases the possibility of an out of wedlock pregnancy. A 2013 report from The National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia documented that the age of first marriage is now approximately 27 for women and 29 for men. But they noted that although many men and women have been postponing marriage to their late twenties and beyond, they have not put off childbearing at the same pace. In fact, for women as a whole, the

⁹³ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan, 1952), 89.

median age at first birth (25.7) now falls before the median age at first marriage (26.5).⁹⁴

1. The sanctity of human life is paramount.

When an unmarried Christian couple becomes pregnant, the most important person is *the baby*. As Christians, we affirm the sanctity of human life as the basic and most essential of all human rights. The child is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26 – 28) and is fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:13 – 16). Whatever choices we make, the choice to abort is not permitted for Christians. Aborting an innocent child only compounds the sinful choices which led to the pregnancy.

Also, we must be clear: The circumstances of the child's conception do not detract from the child's dignity and worth. It is not uncommon for even good church people to make disparaging remarks about a child conceived before a couple was married. This sort of cheap gossip is ungodly and should not be tolerated in the church.

2. Take a deep breath: Your life has changed, but it is not over.

When a Christian couple who are dating discover they are pregnant, it can feel like the world is coming to an end. First of all, the pregnancy itself is evidence to everyone else in the church that you have been violating God's rules about sex, and that brings public embarrassment. Second, there is immediate panic and a cascade of thoughts and fears flow through our minds: "How will we survive? How can we afford a baby? I'll have to quit college! What will my parents say?"

⁹⁴ Kay Hymowitz, Jason S. Carroll, W. Bradford Wilcox, and Kelleen Kaye, *Knot Yet: The Benefits and Costs of Delayed Marriage in America*. The National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia (2013): 3.

Becoming pregnant means your life has indeed permanently changed: You will now be a father or a mother, and thus your identity has changed. And yes, other people will know about your choices. And yes, there are many decisions to be made about your future. But God will be with you through the entire process. Remember, Jesus promises us His presence and comfort, “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.”

Part of finding God’s peace in the midst of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy is confessing the sin of having sex before you are married. Confession and repentance are essential. Proverbs 28:13 says, “Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.” Confess to God the sin of having sex before married, and you will find mercy. Confess the sin to your parents and the appropriate church leader. But what a Christian must not do is pretend that everything is normal and that getting pregnant before getting married is God’s model: It is not. Christians who maintain this attitude will not find the victory God promises.

3. Children in stable, two-parent families fare better

A robust set of data from different nations, across time, and across the socio-economic and ethnic spectrum continues to show that children raised in a traditional family with two married parents yields the best outcomes for children.⁹⁵ The best case outcome for a child conceived outside of marriage is for both of the parents to confess their sin, repent, dedicate themselves to the Lordship of Christ from that moment on, get married, and raise the child in a home permeated with the love of Jesus Christ. In this sense, getting married is a sign of taking responsibility for

⁹⁵ Jane Waldfogel, Terry-Ann Craigie, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, “Fragile Families and Child Well-Being,” *Future Child* 20.2 (2010): 89.

one's actions and trying to make a mature decision for the best of the child as opposed to what would make one's life easier.

4. Three Options

Three clear options seem available to a Christian couple who gets pregnant out of wedlock.

Option 1: Decide to quit having sex, choose not to get married, and one of you raises the child as a single parent.

Option 2: Decide to quit having sex, choose not to get married, and place the child for adoption into a Christian family.

Option 3: Choose to get married and raise the child together.

Notice one option Christian couples should not choose: Move in together and decide later if you want to get married. The Christian rule is that sex is designed for marriage. A couple that gets pregnant, repents, and chooses a solution that does not continue sexual immorality will be within God's moral parameters. However, a Christian couple that gets pregnant while dating and then decides to move in together without marriage reflects a deeper and more fundamentally flawed understanding of Christian sexual ethics.

5. Questions to Ask if You Are Pregnant and Not Married

Here are some questions to ask to determine if you should or should not get married if you get pregnant with someone to whom you are not married (I am speaking to males and females):

1. Is the person with whom I've conceived this child violent or abusive? If so, you should not marry him or her, but should choose options 1 or 2.

2. We both claim to be Christians, but we've been having sex and we've gotten pregnant. Is the person with whom I've conceived this child truly converted, but joined with me in sexual sin, and is sincerely remorseful and repentant? Or is this type of sexual unrestraint characteristic of his or her reputation and character? Are we sincerely converted?

3. Is the person with whom I conceived this child an honorable person, characterized by virtues like kindness, hard work, and truthfulness?

4. Is the person with whom I conceived this child born again? Does he or she show any interest in growing in the Lord? But what if you are the Christian and voluntarily chose to have sex with a nonbeliever? In such a case, a Christian may say, "We are pregnant, but I don't want to be unequally yoked (1 Corinthians 10:13)." I suggest that you should have thought of that before having sex with a nonbeliever. If he or she is otherwise an honorable person without any seriously threatening traits (drug addict, abusive) and is willing to marry, it seems marriage would be the right thing.

5. Has the person with whom I've conceived this child expressed a willingness to enter into a lifelong covenant? Had we discussed marriage at all prior to becoming pregnant?

6. Ladies: Does he have a job and is he willing to work?

7. How old are we? A Christian couple in their teens may have quite a different answer than a Christian couple in their 20s. Marriage at unusually young ages – even when pregnant – seems unwise.

In many cases, couples have gotten pregnant, gotten married, and moved on to happy and joyful lives together. In other cases, marrying the

person with whom you became pregnant is like painting yourself into a corner, and then putting on a second coat! Move forward with caution, seek Godly advice, and make a decision that honors God and is the best decision for the baby.

VIII. Preparing for Marriage and the Ceremony

Today, couples spend more time and money preparing for the wedding ceremony than they do preparing for marriage. An entire industry has emerged around weddings. Social media buzzes with the latest photos of engagements and weddings. James K. A. Smith said:

Our interest is in the spectacle of the wedding – the event in which we get to be center stage, display our love, and invite others into our romance in a way they’ll never forget. . . . It’s why we spend more time fixated on the spectacular flash of the wedding event than the long slog of sustaining marriage.⁹⁶

Indeed, in our modern culture more time, money, and effort is put into the wedding event itself – which lasts one day – than to the actual marriage – which is intended to last until death. Of course, it is possible to strike a good balance and both earnestly prepare for marriage while having a wonderful wedding day.

A. Preparing for Marriage

How should a couple prepare for marriage together? We begin by practicing good habits before we are married which will give the derived benefit of relational strength after we are married. Healthy habits of behavior before a couple are actually wedded sets the stage for healthy habits of behavior after the wedding.

⁹⁶ James K.A. Smith, “Marriage for the Common Good,” *Comment*, <https://comment.org/marriage-for-the-common-good/>.

1. Practice habits of spiritual maturity.

The best way to prepare for marriage is to practice consistent habits of spiritual maturity in your own life. Daily Bible reading, prayer, and Scripture memory are essential habits in the process of forming sanctification and developing spiritual maturity. Emotionally mature and spiritually strong people are more resilient and handle daily stressors with greater calm. Prepare for marriage by preparing yourself first.

2. Money

You can prepare yourself for marriage by learning to manage money *now* while you are single. Even if your income is small, you will never be able to manage larger amounts of money until you learn to manage smaller amounts of money. Also, if you first learn to manage money as an individual, you will be more successful managing money as a couple. Money-management skills learned while you are single pay dividends when you are married. If you want your marriage to be successful, learn to manage money now.

Once two people meet, fall in love, and decide to get married, I strongly recommend the couple enroll in a Financial Peace University course. The biggest and most immediate challenge a couple will face in the first couple of years in marriage is usually handling money as a team. The Ramsey material is extremely well done and will also teach a couple how to communicate. I realize when a couple is head over heels in love the last thing either of them wants to think about is a budget, but there is nothing romantic about going broke! I promise, you will enjoy the thrill of romance far more if you spend less than you earn, tithe, save money, and live on a budget.

3. Premarital Counseling

In addition to Financial Peace University, each couple should receive some sort of premarital counseling. This can be done in different ways. Any pastor serious about doing his job will require you to have some form of premarital counseling. The pastor may prefer to do this with the couple himself, or some churches have a pre-marital class which all couples must attend. There are many great Christian counselors in private practice who can be of tremendous help as well. Remember, you are joining two different people from different family dynamics. Good premarital counseling will alert you to how your different backgrounds might pose potential problems, and give skills for working through them. Premarital counseling is essential, but usually prepares a couple for the initial two or three years together. But successful marriages are composed of lifelong learners who never stop searching for good advice about marriage.

B. The Wedding Ceremony

The wedding ceremony itself should be Christ-honoring and rooted in the deepest traditions of the church, not the latest fads of culture. I still use a modified version of the wedding ceremony from the *Book of Common Prayer*. The wedding ceremony is a Christian worship service and should be treated as such. There is no room for silly shenanigans in a worship service. Save all the silly things for the reception.

When people today think of a wedding, they think of a huge party. Certainly a wedding is a time for a celebration, but it should not be a drunken bash. Honor Christ at your wedding. Demonstrate to an unbelieving world how to experience unbridled, sober joy which leaves no regrets. There is a demonstrable, felt difference between weddings where Christ is honored as opposed to weddings which are just a drunken party.

It is one of the observable signs of conversion when believers desire a Christ-magnifying wedding.⁹⁷

Don't let the world deceive you into thinking you must spend thousands upon thousands of dollars to have a lovely, Christ-honoring wedding ceremony. I'm afraid too many young couples today are discouraged from getting married because they think they must stage a spectacular show. There is no harm in a celebration, but a celebration need not send the young couple or the families involved to the poor house. Tasteful simplicity is timeless.

The location of the wedding need not be an exotic, spectacular destination. Church weddings are always tasteful, but a small gathering of the family in a home with a dear pastor present and the loving encouragement of the parents is a holy scene. While destination weddings can be wonderful, they also pose tremendous logistical and financial challenges which can detract from the joy of joining two lives together.

IX. The Moral Goodness of Sex within Marriage

God expects couples who get married to have sex, but we don't get married just so we can have sex. I provide extensive discussions of sexual ethics elsewhere, so my comments here will be introductory and focused more on pastoral advice for Christian couples. While sex is a wonderful part of marriage, remember that marriage is not *just* an avenue for having sex. Marriage is the joining of two lives. If you think it is just about sex, you are headed for trouble.

A. Sex is designed for Marriage

⁹⁷ In *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Works of God*, Jonathan Edwards observed revival brought a difference to wedding ceremonies, and said, "And even at weddings, which formerly were mere occasions of mirth and jollity, there was now no discourse of anything but religion, and no appearance of any but spiritual mirth." Jonathan Edwards, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* (Lawton, OK: Trumpet Press, 2019; 1737), 27.

Genesis 2:24-25: For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. (NASB)

The first and most obvious observation to be made is that sex is designed by God to be enjoyed within the marriage covenant. God is not against sex; God opposes the abuse of sex. God's design is for sex to be celebrated within marriage. In Genesis 2:24 -25, shameless sexual intimacy follows leaving and cleaving and is preceded by a public ceremony. Marriage is the safe place for sex to be enjoyed and celebrated. Victor Hamilton notes that with the exception of Genesis 2:25, nakedness in the OT is always connected with some form of humiliation.⁹⁸ This contrast makes the tender gift of sex and shameless intimacy between a husband and wife more vivid and compelling. The nakedness a husband and wife share is an image of openness and trust,⁹⁹ as they say to each other, "I can be completely vulnerable to you." In almost every situation in life, to be found naked is embarrassing and shameful. But when a husband and wife are alone, there is no shamefulness associated with their nudity, only loving tenderness.

Notice carefully that the shameless intimacy of verse 2:25 is subsequent to the covenant established in 2:24. God's order is covenant first, shameless intimacy second. Our culture attempts to invert God's order by beginning with sexual intimacy and then moving towards a covenant relationship. This approach is bound for moral and emotional disaster.

B. Clarification Concerning a Confusing Verse

⁹⁸ Victor Hamilton, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament Genesis 1 – 17*, 181.

⁹⁹ Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 90.

I Corinthians 7:1 (CSB): Now in response to the matters you wrote about: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.”

I Corinthians 7:1 has been misunderstood by some people to be a Pauline admonition that either celibacy is to be preferred over marriage or that Christians should have a “Platonic” marriage in which the husband and wife do not have conjugal relations. In 1 Corinthians 7:1 Paul is not stating a maxim he expects the church to follow, but instead he is quoting a saying popular among some people in the Corinthian church which he himself rejects. The interpretative key to 1 Corinthians 7:1 is found in the opening phrase, “Περὶ δὲ ὧν ἐγράψατε” – “Concerning the things you wrote.” This phrase indicates that the Corinthians had written to Paul and asked him some questions. The second half of 1 Corinthians 7:1 contains one of the topics they wanted Paul to address. The phrase, “καλὸν ἀνθρώπῳ γυναικὸς μὴ ἅπτεσθαι” is evidently a mantra of sexual ethics being advocated by some people in the church at Corinth. Apparently, this idea was causing some division in the church and they wanted Paul to comment on it. This is why the CSB puts the statement in quotation marks to indicate Paul is quoting someone else.

What did the Corinthians mean by the phrase, “It is good for a man not to have relations with a woman”? First the Greek word translated “have relations with” is ἅπτεσθαι (*haptesthai*) and it occurs widely in extra-biblical Greek literature as a euphemism for “to have sexual intercourse with.”¹⁰⁰ While exact specificity cannot be determined, the phrase was apparently used by some Corinthians to advocate the following approach to sexual ethics: “Men should not have sex with women, even the women to whom they are married!” In the balance of I Corinthians 7, Paul corrects

¹⁰⁰ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, in *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 500.

the overly ascetic ethic reflected in this statement popular among some of the Corinthian church.

Oh, the pains of being the pastor at Corinth! Some members in the congregation were arguing for complete sexual liberty (1 Cor. 6:12 ff) while other members were the polar opposites and said it was wrong to have sex *even when married!*

C. Sex in Marriage and the Abatement of Lust

I Corinthians 7:2: But because of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman should have her own husband.

One reason for the gift of sex in marriage is to help us fight the temptation of lust. A healthy love life in the home promotes integrity. But 1 Corinthians 7:2 does not mean one can wantonly abandon his or her spouse by crying, "But she / he is not meeting my needs!"

D. Husbands, Wives, and Mutual Giving in Marriage

I Corinthians 7:3: A husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise a wife to her husband. (HCS)

I Corinthians 7:3: Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband. (KJV)

1. Expository Comments

Marital Duty. The Greek phrase translated "marital duty" in 1 Corinthians 7:3 is ὀφειλὴν ἀποδιδότω. This Greek phrase can be literally translated "fulfill the obligation" or "pay the debt," referring to the fulfillment of sexual needs within marriage. Thus the NET Bible says, "A husband should give to his wife her sexual rights, and likewise a wife to

her husband.” It is clearly a euphemism for sexual intercourse between the husband and wife.

Notice the equality between husband and wife in 1 Corinthians 7:3: The husband has a sexual responsibility to his wife and the wife has a sexual responsibility to her husband.

2. Application

1 Corinthians 7:3 has been used by some people to “demand” sex from a husband or a wife. “Demanding sex” is the furthestmost thing from Paul’s mind. In Scripture, sex in marriage is a tender gift shared between a husband who loves his wife and a wife who honors her husband.

It is wrong to use sex as a “weapon” in marriage. By this, I am referring to the practice of some people to withhold sex from their spouse as a tool of manipulation: “If you do what I want (buy me the car; give me the week long cruise), then I will give you sex. Otherwise, I’m withholding it until I get my way.” This is a childish and immature attitude clearly inconsistent with 1 Corinthians 7:3.

A warning sign of deep trouble in a marriage is when a couple willfully stops having sex with each other (medical problems noted).

It is of some interest to note that Paul does not mention procreation here. While Paul certainly would have Genesis 1 & 2 in mind and would not reject the idea of procreation, he does not mention procreation here. There has been a strand of thought throughout Church history that has said the *only* purpose for sex in marriage is procreation. Some have gone so far as to say Christian couples should feel guilty for enjoying sex within marriage. Nothing could be further from Paul’s mind in 1 Corinthians 7:3.

E. Purposes of Sex in Marriage

Taking the text of Scripture as a whole, seven purposes can be identified for sex in marriage.

1. Procreation

Genesis 1:26 – 28; Genesis 4:1

A natural and expected part of a Christian marriage is that home will one day be blessed by children. In my opinion, this does not necessarily mean Christians are obligated to have as many children as possible. At the same time, neither does it necessarily mean that each Christian couple must stop at one child. Students can see my notes on contraception for more details, but my point here is that children are an expected part of marriage, medical issues preventing such from happening being duly noted.

2. Dominion Over the Earth – Genesis 1:28

The result of sex, children, help us fulfill the mandate to care for God's creation and have dominion over it. We should have children and train them to discover God's will for their lives and how this is part of stewarding the earth God has given us.

3. Shameless Intimacy

Genesis 2:24-25: This is why a man leaves his father and mother and bonds with his wife, and they become one flesh. Both the man and the wife were naked, yet felt no shame.

4. Comfort

Genesis 24:67: Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and he took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her; thus Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

Genesis 24:67 is a very tender passage which is often overlooked, but here we see how a wife's kindness in lovemaking comforted her husband while he was grieving the death his mother. The tenderness of marital love offers comfort in dark, jagged edged places in life.

5. Relaxation and Play

Proverbs 5:18 – 19 (NIV): May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer— may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love.

Song of Songs 1:2 – 4a:

2 Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—
for your love is more delightful than wine.

3 Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes;
your name is like perfume poured out.
No wonder the maidens love you!

4 Take me away with you—let us hurry!
Let the king bring me into his chambers.

6. A Way to Celebrate Love in Marriage

Song of Songs 4:16 – 5:1

[The woman / the bride] Awaken, north wind—
come, south wind.
Blow on my garden,
and spread the fragrance of its spices.
Let my love come to his garden
and eat its choicest fruits.

[The man / the husband] I have come to my garden—my sister, my bride.
 I gather my myrrh with my spices.
 I eat my honeycomb with my honey.
 I drink my wine with my milk.

[The Chorus] Eat, friends!
 Drink, be intoxicated with love!

Sex is intended to be an expression of love between a husband and a wife. The tender moments alone are way to express one's devotion and care for beloved spouse.

7. A Form of Protection against Sexual Immorality

I Corinthians 7:2 (NASB): But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband.

F. Our Culture Inverts God's order

Our culture's view of sexual ethics inverts the order found in Genesis 2:24 - 25 and attempts to begin with shameless intimacy and move towards unity. Couples today begin by having sex and then hope a strong, resilient relationship emerges. This inverted thinking contributes to permissive attitudes towards divorce.

G. When difficulties arise in marriage related to sex.

For most couples, the initial sexual encounters in marriage are filled with awkward excitement which usually transitions to more comfort and confidence in pleasing and being pleased by each other. The joy of two becoming one flesh is usually a delight easily embraced. When two people are alone, they figure out what to do.

But there are times when the joy of a sex in marriage is frustrated by problems psychological, emotional, or physical and the excitement of sex is

absent and only frustration or anxiety exist. In some cases, it is difficult or impossible for a husband or wife to enjoy pleasing or being pleased by his or her spouse. The reasons for such difficulties are manifold, but if this is your situation, keep a few key ideas in mind. First, you are not the first couple to face such problems and you will not be the last. Other couples have overcome such challenges and you can as well. Second, never underestimate how far patience and tender understanding can serve to bring unity and healing when such problems occur. Third, a difficult and yet painfully common reality is that sexual trauma is too common in our culture. There are cases when trauma prior to marriage is so associated with the act of sex that it is difficult to separate sex in marriage from the pain of terrifying experiences in the past. The good news is that help is available and with the right medical or psychological help, even what seems the most daunting situation can reach a happy resolution, often with a deeper love and appreciation for each other being the result.

X. Husbands, Wives, and Ephesians 5:22 – 6:1

Ephesians 5:22 – 6:1 is a tender contrast to the culture surrounding early Christians. In the early Roman Republic, the powers of the father were theoretically unbounded and the oldest living male in a family had immense power. A *paterfamilias* [male head of household with no living father or grandfather] held *paterpotestas*, powers of life and death over all family members, including his slaves and most of his freedmen, and while the power of the male head of household did change over time, even into the era of the Roman Empire the *paterfamilias* continued to have terrifying rights. The *paterfamilias* retained the key right to accept or occasionally reject – if the baby was deformed or of dubious paternity – every newborn child laid at his feet.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, a *paterfamilias* had the right to disown his own children or sell them into slavery.¹⁰² Against the background of the almost tyrannical rule of the *paterfamilias*, Ephesians 5:22 – 6:1 stands out in

¹⁰¹ Nigel Rodgers, *The Roman World: People and Places* (London: Lorenz Books, 2005), 218.

¹⁰² Because Roman mortality rates were so high, especially among women giving birth, many people found themselves marrying several times without having gotten a divorce. Nigel Rodgers, *The Roman World*, 219.

stark contrast for the compassionate leadership enjoined on Christian fathers.

Ephesians 5:22 - 5:26: Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord, for the husband is head of the wife as also Christ is head of the Church. He is the Savior of the body. Now as the church submits to Christ, so wives should submit to their husbands in everything. . . . Husbands love your wives, just as also Christ loved the church and gave himself for her, to make her holy, cleansing her in the washing of water by the word.

Paul asserts that appropriate roles exist for men and women in marriage. These different roles are grounded in creation. Ephesians 5:22 – 33 contains the longest sustained teaching in the NT concerning marriage and the relationship between husbands and wives, with 47 words directed to wives and 143 to husbands.¹⁰³ This passage has a parallel in Colossians 3:18 – 21.

A. Ephesians 5:22 – 6:1 in relationship to Ephesians 5:21

Ephesians 5:21: Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

There is significant debate among some evangelicals concerning the relationship of Ephesians 5:21 to the household instructions in Ephesians 5:22 – 6:1. Some evangelicals believe Ephesians 5:21 is only talking about relationships within the local church and is not addressing marriages. Other evangelicals see Ephesians 5:21 as a transitional verse with implications both for our relationships with other Christians in the local church and for relationships between husbands and wives.

Modern Greek New Testaments do not include the word “submit” (ὑποτάσσω) in Ephesians 5:22. The textual decision that Ephesians 5:22 excludes the word submit is based on a shorter reading existent among the

¹⁰³ Benjamin L. Merkle, *Ephesians*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2016), 180.

more ancient manuscripts. Although, numerically, more manuscripts include the word submit. These longer readings of Ephesians 5:22 include one of two forms of the word “submit.” Several of these witnesses have ὑποταστέσθωσαν, the third person imperative (so ⋈ A I P Ψ 0278 33 81 1175 1739 1881 *al lat co*), while other witnesses, especially the later Byzantine cursives, read ὑποτάσσεσθε, which is either a second person plural present middle imperative or present passive imperative (D F G Ī sy). However, the shorter reading is attested by two significant and early manuscripts P 46 and B. P 46 is a manuscript dated to circa 200 B.C. and includes parts of several Pauline Epistles and Hebrews. B is the famous Codex Vaticanus. Metzger comments on why the shorter reading is preferred when he says, “A majority of the committee preferred the shorter reading, which accords with the succinct style of the author’s admonitions, and explained the other readings as expansions introduced for the sake of clarity, the main verb being required especially when the words Αἱ γυναῖκες stood at the beginning of the scripture lesson.”¹⁰⁴ Metzger is alluding to the fact that there are old lectionaries in which a daily reading ends at Ephesians 5:21 and a new one begins at Ephesians 5:22. For the new daily reading beginning at 5:22 to make sense, the verb supplied from 5:21 had to be inserted in the lectionary.

If the shorter reading of Ephesians 5:22 is correct, as I suspect it is, the text of Ephesians 5:22 needs a verb to make sense. Therefore, the verb “submit” is supplied from Ephesians 5:21. This tends to favor the NIV’s paragraph division which attaches verse 21 to the paragraph that follows. So, Ephesians 5:21 is informative for our understanding of the directives in 5:22 – 6:1, but to what degree? Peter O’Brien seems to articulate the right connection when he says, “What submitting to one another means is spelled out in the household table, with its ordered array in society. And submitting to one another is a significant outworking of being filled with the Spirit. . . . The apostle is not speaking of *mutual* submission in the sense of a reciprocal subordination, but submission to those who are in authority

¹⁰⁴ Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: United Bible Society, 1971), 609.

over them.”¹⁰⁵ Our example is our own Lord Jesus Christ who washed the feet of His disciples. Though Jesus was serving and submitting to the role of a servant in that context, no one there would have thought Jesus was *not* the leader.

B. Ephesians 5:21 – 5:33 is Unique In Antiquity

Because modern people criticize the Biblical teachings regarding marriage in Ephesians 5, we [modern Christians / Baptists] miss the extraordinary way the entire textual unit of Ephesians 5:21 – 6:9 (as well as Colossians 3:18 – 21) was thoroughly different from other guidelines for households in antiquity. Academics often refer to Ephesians 5:21/22 – 6:9 as a *Haustafeln*, a German word for *house-tables* or *household codes*; a word used since Luther’s time to describe Biblical passages detailing family duties. Ephesians 5:21 – 6:9 is unusual when compared to other *Haustafeln* from antiquity in its pattern of addressing the subordinate persons in the social order (wives, children, slaves) as moral agents who must *choose* to “be subject.” Other *Haustafeln* from the First Century era only address the holders of power – the men – and instruct them on their duties to those subject to them.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, the guidelines in Ephesians 5:21ff are notable for their reciprocity: It does not merely call on the less powerful to submit, but it equally charges the more powerful (husbands, fathers, masters) to act with Christian gentleness toward and in concern for those over whom they exercise authority.¹⁰⁷ In this way, Ephesians gives a dignity to wives, children, and servants that they frequently did not have in antiquity and elevates their moral status. All members of the household are treated as responsible, moral agents.

C. The two essential principles are love and respect.

¹⁰⁵ Peter T. O’Brien, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 404. O’Brien rejects the “mutual subordination” argument of Gilbert Bilezikian.

¹⁰⁶ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 64. I strongly reject Hays’ opinion that Paul did not write Ephesians.

¹⁰⁷ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 65.

Ephesians 5:33: Nevertheless, as for you individually, each husband is to love his own wife the same as himself, and the wife *must see to it* that she respects her husband.

At the conclusion of the extended discussion of the roles of husbands and wives, Paul summarizes his teaching in Ephesians 5:33 by saying the husband must “love his own wife” and the wife must “see to it that she respects her husband.” These two principles – love and respect – are essential to a strong, stable, happy marriage. And the word *respect* helps us understand what Paul intends by using the word *submit* in 5:22 – 24.

The Greek word translated *respect* in Ephesians 5:33 is *phobeō*, and is used here in the sense of treating the husband’s leadership with dutiful regard and deference. George Knight says the respect called for here is primarily to the role the person occupies and not to the particular merits of the person.¹⁰⁸ May God grant it that a wife can respect the husband both for his high character and the role he occupies. The same word is used in Ephesians 5:21 which begins this section by saying we are to have a mutual fear of Christ. Every husband wants very badly to be respected by his wife. Commenting on Ephesians 5:33, Adrian Rogers said, “A woman is to a man what wind is to fire. She can fan up a man’s enthusiasm or blow it out.”¹⁰⁹

I am often frustrated at how lost people talk about Christian marriages. When I encounter non-Christians who enquire about my own marriage, I am quite surprised at how many stereotypes and caricatures they repeat, which are obviously based on what they assume to be true for us as Christians and reflect the fact they have never really interacted with genuine Christians. Usually, their caricatures are based on what Hollywood tells them Christians are like. The tenderness of Christian marriage can be seen in William Carey’s comments after his second wife’s

¹⁰⁸ George W. Knight, III, “Husbands and Wives As Analogues of Christ and the Church: Ephesians 5:21 – 33 and Colossians 3:18 -19, in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 175.

¹⁰⁹ Adrian Rogers, *God’s Way to Health, Wealth, and Wisdom* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 140.

death: “We had been married thirteen years and three weeks, during all which season, I believe, we had as great a share of conjugal happiness as ever was enjoyed by mortals. She was eminently pious, and lived very near to God. The Bible was her daily delight, and next to God, she loved only me.”¹¹⁰ Carey went on to describe how she could discern how he was thinking by his facial expressions and it was useless to try to hide something from her.

D. Wives

Ephesians 5:22 – 24 (NASB): Wives, *be subject* to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself *being* the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives *ought to be* to their husbands in everything.

Modern English translations are correct when they supply the verb “submit” (ὑποτάσσω) in verse 22, with the imperative being understood instead of the participle.¹¹¹ The word “submit” supplied from verse 21 translates a military term which means to “place under” or “to subordinate” or “to line up under.” The word ὑποτάσσω means “to arrange under” and implies “submission of someone in an ordered array to another person who was above the first in some way, for example, the submission of soldiers in an army to those of superior rank.”¹¹² The word ὑποτάσσω occurs twenty-three times in Paul (not counting the longer reading of Ephesians 5:22) and denotes subordination to people worthy of respect, either because of their inherent qualities or because of the positions they hold.

One of the unfortunate problems of translating the Bible from the original language to a receptor language is that words often have nuances

¹¹⁰ John Brown Myers, *William Carey: The Shoemaker Who Became the Father and Founder of Modern Missions* (Kilmarnock, Scotland: John Ritchie Publishers, n.d.), 92.

¹¹¹ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 411.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 399.

in the receptor language that are foreign to the Bible. For example, *submit* is the correct translation of ὑποτάσσω, but in English “submit” sometimes carries the idea of someone being coerced into compliance by the use of pain or force. For example, when discussing self-defense or MMA, one may use a submission hold on one’s opponent. But the Greek word ὑποτάσσω does not carry the idea of coercive force leading to compliance. An idea of how the word ὑποτάσσω should be understood is seen in Luke 2:51 which says, “An He [Jesus] went down with them [his parents] and came to Nazareth, and He continued in subjection [ὑποτασσόμενος – present passive participle of ὑποτάσσω] to them; and His mother treasured all these things in her heart.” If Jesus was submissive during His incarnation, the term cannot entail something bad or harmful. Furthermore, 1 Corinthians 15:28 also says Jesus will “be subjected to the One who subjected to Him, so that God may be all in all.” The word ὑποτάσσω is also used in Romans 13:1 in which everyone is told to “be in subjection” to the governing authorities.

1. *Not* all women to *all* men: The command is limited to marriage.

First, let us be clear: text does not say *all women* are to submit to *all men*. The text is narrow in focus and has heterosexual and monogamous marriage in mind. A. Skevington Wood says, “It should be noted that all Paul says is within the context of a Christian marriage. He is not implying that women are inferior to men or that all women should be subject to men.”¹¹³ This distinction is made clear when Paul says wives are to submit “to your *own* (ἴδιος) husbands,” narrowing the application to the home.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, young men who attempt to use Ephesians 5:22 – 24 to substantiate a position that women should submit to men in a dating relationship are flatly wrong and such men should be avoided by any single Christian woman! I am often asked, “Well, when does the submission to the husband begin?” My answer is, “When he says, ‘I do!’”

¹¹³ A. Skevington Wood, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 11, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 75.

¹¹⁴ Hoehner agrees and says, “Paul means that the wife is to submit to her husband as opposed to men in general.” Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 732.

Some men have wrongly assumed that passages like Ephesians 5:22 ff, Colossians 3:18 – 21, and 1 Peter 3:1 – 7 give men a privileged status, and this privileged status is further extrapolated to all other male-female interactions in culture. This wrong conclusion might in fact be called *patriarchy*, and I contend the Bible teaches a complementarian view of males and females in the home and church, but does not necessarily teach patriarchy. To distinguish the two, *patriarchy* can be defined as brazen male dominance which dismisses the value of women; Biblical complementarianism teaches the servant leadership of the husband in the home (and pastors in the church) while affirming the innate value and worth of the wife, who willingly grants her husband the role of servant-leader.

2. The Submission Described Here Voluntary

Marriage is entered into by mutual consent and the submission mentioned in Ephesians 5:22 - 24 is intelligent and voluntary. It cannot be coerced. When understood in light of what follows in Ephesians 5:25, a husband who asserts in a brazen manner that his wife is “required to submit” has missed the tenderness of the entire passage.

3. Ephesians 5:22 - 24 does not mean submission to physical abuse

In our culture, some secular people have assumed that “submission” language means the Bible is saying a wife must quietly submit to physical abuse. Nothing is more remote from the truth. The context here is of a loving Christian home where the husband loves his wife as Christ loves the church. No wife is expected to “submit” herself to physical violence in the name of “Biblical submission.” Nothing in the text of Ephesians 5:22 – 6:1 should be taken as a license for husbands to exploit their wives or be abusive to them. In fact, everything in the text militates against such a twisted understanding of God’s order in the home. If a husband assaults his wife, a crime has been committed: God does not call any Christian willingly to accept violent, criminal behavior.

4. Submission does not mean the wife has no voice

Some people have wrongly assumed that Ephesians 5:22 – 24 means a wife has no voice or input into family decisions. This is a ludicrous conclusion based a poor understanding of Ephesians 5:22 – 24 and it also ignores several other passages of Scripture. In describing the virtuous wife, Proverbs 31:26 says, “She opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue is the law of kindness.” God gives a man a wife to speak wisdom into his life and marriage. A smart man will listen to her.

One Christian man said, “My wife is a Godly, submissive wife . . . especially when I listen well!”

5. “As unto the Lord.”

Wives are to give their husbands honor as the servant-leader, but the Bible does not teach that wives should give their husbands unconditional obedience.¹¹⁵ Ephesians 5:22 contains an important qualifying phrase, and says wives should submit to their husbands “as unto the Lord.” Colossians 3:18 says something similar, “Wives, submit to you own husbands, *as is fitting in the Lord.*” Submission to the Lord never includes a submission to sinful behavior: The husband’s role is not unconstrained but constrained and submission to one’s husband does not mean a wife must acquiesce to or participate in sinful behavior. In fact, obedience to sinful behavior is disobedience to God.

6. Submission is willingness to let and encourage the husband to lead.

What does *submission* in Ephesians 5:22 – 24 mean? Submission is willingness to let and encourage the husband to lead. Submission to one’s husband is a tangible expression of submission to Christ and, when practiced properly, is a lovely expression of God’s design for marriage.¹¹⁶ When the husband initiates family worship and prayer, the wife should joyfully support his leadership and bring the children to the family

¹¹⁵ Timothy Keller with Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 278.

¹¹⁶ This sentence is from a former student, Selah Ulmer.

worship. When the husband determines to be a tither and lead his family in giving to the Lord, the wife should joyfully support his leadership. Perhaps the idea of submission is best captured in Ephesians 5:33 when Paul says “let the wife see that she respects her husband.”

Timothy and Kathy Keller emphasize that the wife’s submission does not imply a subservient silence. They comment:

The wife is never to be merely compliant but is to use her resources to empower. She is to be her husband’s most trusted friend and counselor, as he is hers. . . . She must bring every gift and resource that she has to the discussion, and he must, as any wise manager, know when to allow her expertise to trump his own, less well-informed opinion.¹¹⁷

Only a distorted misunderstanding of the Bible would lead a husband to say his wife should be silent in decision-making.

Ephesians 5:23 says, “For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself *being* the Savior of the body.” Paul says the same thing in 1 Corinthians 11:3, “But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.” John Stott comments, “The Biblical teaching is that God has given to man (and especially to the husband in the marriage relationship) a certain headship, and that his wife will find herself and her true God-given role not in rebellion against him or his headship, but in a voluntary and joyful submission.”¹¹⁸

Ephesians 5:23 also itself clarifies the type of headship a husband should model: The husband’s headship is compared to Christ’s headship over the church. Paul then emphasizes Jesus’ leadership and says, “He Himself *being* the Savior of the body.” Commenting on this verse, Stott says, “The head of the body is the savior of the body; the characteristic of

¹¹⁷ Timothy Keller with Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 277 – 278.

¹¹⁸ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), 222.

his headship is not so much lordship as saviorhood.”¹¹⁹ Christ’s headship is rooted in the fact he is our savior. Certainly this gives some idea of the type of headship a husband should model for his wife and family.

God’s plan for women in marriage is better than anything the world can invent or attempt as a substitute. Proverbs 14:1 says, “The wise woman builds her house, but the foolish tears it down with her own hands.” Nicki Knowles, one of my former students, once shared with an undergraduate class some words of wisdom from close to forty years of marriage. Her husband is a fine man, and they spent the first two decades of their marriage in active duty with the Army. She wrote some beautiful words of advice to Christian women:

Micki Knowles’ Words on Marriage:

Pray together always.

Don’t keep score-of anything.

Speak the truth with grace-words which are very powerful.

Be gentle with is heart.

He needs your trust and your respect.

Allow him to be the head of the home as God intended.

Expect him to be the man God intended him to be; treat him as if he is, even when he isn’t.

Be patient and tender.

Cherish every moment you have together and graciously accept every gift he offers you.

¹¹⁹ Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, 225. This is in no way meant to intend that Jesus is not Lord of the church, for Colossians 1:15ff makes clear Jesus is in fact Lord of the church. The point is merely that Paul is emphasizing Christ’s saviorhood here.

Never speak a harsh word about him to others-nor allow others to either.

You are his strength, his heart, his rest.

You are his home.

E. Husbands

Ephesians 5:25 (NASB): ²⁵Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, ²⁶so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. ²⁸So husbands also ought to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; ²⁹for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also *does* the church, ³⁰because we are parts of His body. ³¹FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND HIS MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. ³²This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.

God calls husbands to serve as a spiritual leader in the home. This God-ordained task of headship is not for the purpose of the wife's servile subjection to the husband's every whim or bad decision, but is for the common good of the marriage. If the husband leads in a Godly manner, his affection, protection, and support for his wife and family will become more manifest and more abiding.¹²⁰

1. A Husband should love his wife unconditionally.

The command to the Husbands is even more challenging: they are to love their wives as Christ loved the church. How did Christ love the

¹²⁰ Edward T. Hiscox, *The New Directory for Baptist Churches*, The Baptist Distinctives Series, Number 18 (Paris, AR: The Baptist Standard Bearer Inc., 1894, reprint 2006), 38.

church? Romans 5:8 says, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” Christ sacrificed his life for us even though we were rebellious, imperfect sinners. Likewise, a husband should love his wife in spite of imperfections and flaws.

Commenting on Ephesians 5:25, Harold Hoehner says, “Thus in this context husbands are to love their wives even when they may seem undeserving and unloving, in other words, unconditionally.”¹²¹ We have married our best friend, and when we have a friend for a wife, we think her better than ourselves, love her more than ourselves, and desire her good more than we desire our own.

2. A husband should love his wife continually.

The verb “love” in Ephesians 5:25 is the present imperative of ἀγαπάω, the present imperative here enforcing the idea that the husband’s love for the wife is to be an ongoing process.¹²² There is never a time when Jesus does not love us. Likewise, there should never be a time when a husband does not love his wife in attitude, action, word, and deed.

3. A husband should love his wife by serving her.

The preponderance of responsibility falls on the husband to set the pace for “OUTSERVING” his wife. The Biblical model is in this way differentiated from other ideas about order in the household found in antiquity. For example, Aristotle said, “The relation of husband to wife seems to be in the nature of an aristocracy: the husband rules in virtue of fitness, and in matters that belong to a man’s sphere; matters suited to a woman he hands over to his wife.”¹²³ In contrast, while the Bible urges men to be the spiritual leaders in the home, their leadership is *servant leadership* based on *sacrificial love*, concepts far different from the husband’s rule described by Aristotle. Christ was the leader but he washed the feet of

¹²¹ Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 747.

¹²² Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 747.

¹²³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Loeb Classical Library*, H. Rackham, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934, rev. ed.), 493 (VIII.x.5).

his disciples. Likewise, when a husband loves his wife, he is willing to serve and minister to her.

4. Being a spiritual leader does not mean the husband is a dictator.

O.S. Hawkins says, “Some marriages are in trouble because the husband tries to be the lord instead of the lover.”¹²⁴ Some men confuse spiritual leadership with dictatorship. Instead of seeing themselves as a servant leaders to their families, these men act like some shabby form of oriental potentate with servants scurrying about at his every wish and command. Such a childish and immature attitude is not what the Bible teaches.

5. A husband seeks to cultivate the very best qualities in his wife.

A husband who loves his wife as Christ loves the Church will seek to cultivate the very best qualities in his wife. I do not mean the husband should approach his relationship with his wife like a renovation project in which he tries to shape her into his ideal. What I mean is that a Christian husband should treat his wife in such a way that Christian virtues are appealing – that faith, hope, and love grow within her as she sees them exemplified in her husband’s life.

6. A Christian husband loves his wife in spite of her flaws.

Every human being on the face of the Earth is a sinner, and that means each of us has flaws. Every husband is a flawed sinner and every wife is a flawed sinner. Jesus Christ loved us and died for us when we were sinners! Sometimes a husband might think, “I’m in a very unfortunate situation in marriage and my wife is difficult to love. She is unkind or ill-tempered. Surely I’m relieved of this command to love her so sacrificially. Surely I can’t be expected to love what is so very unlovely.” Charles

¹²⁴ O.S. Hawkins, *The Pastor’s Primer* (Dallas, TX: Guidestone, 2006), 220.

Spurgeon refuted this sort of thinking about marriage and, commenting on Ephesians 5:25, he said, “But he [Paul] silences that excuse, which may possibly have occurred to his mind while writing the passage, by taking the example of the Savior, who loved, not because there was loveliness in his Church, but in order to make her lovely.” Spurgeon goes on to say that Christ “loved the spots” and “loved the wrinkles” out of the Church.¹²⁵

There is a radiant glow of confidence and joy around a woman certain that her husband loves her in spite of her flaws. The radiant glow burns from an inner feeling of being loved by a man devoted to her and her best interests. The confidence comes from a feeling of being beautiful in his eyes, and that his eyes are fixed on her alone. Not infrequently, women who are loved and cherished in such a manner begin to grow not only in spiritual beauty but carry themselves with a mature sense of outer beauty and comportment as well. So much so, that others notice, and may comment, “My, but she looks so lovely.”

7. A husband’s love should be sacrificial: The husband’s authority (like God the Son’s over us) is never used to please himself but only to serve the interests of his wife.

The love of the husband for his wife should be sacrificial. Notice here that Paul grounds his theology of marriage in the atonement of Jesus Christ. And Christ’s atonement was offered so that you and I might be saved. In this way, the sacrificial love of Christ is the standard for a husband’s sacrificial love. As Timothy and Kathy Keller say, “The husband’s authority (like the Son’s over us) is never used to please himself but only to serve the interests of his wife. Headship does not mean a husband simply “makes all the decisions,” nor does it mean he gets his way in every disagreement.”¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Charles Spurgeon, “A Glorious Church: A Sermon Delivered on Sunday, May 7, 1865,” *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 254.

¹²⁶ Timothy Keller with Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 277.

8. Marriage is picture of Christ's covenant with the Church.

The reference to a husband loving his wife like Christ loves the Church also amplifies the covenantal nature of marriage. By this, I am not arguing that marriage is sacramental or that it is a way of receiving grace. No, marriage is not a sacrament. But marriage is a picture of salvation and Christ's covenant. Christ is the groom and the church is his bride. Christ loves, redeems, and cares for the church. A Christian marriage should be a picture of this relationship. The husband loves and cares for his bride as Christ tenderly cares for the church. Similarly, Christ is faithful to His church and a husband should be faithful to his wife. In this way a heterosexual and monogamous marriage paints a picture of Christ's relationship with his church.

Same-sex marriages do not communicate this picture about the covenantal nature of marriage, but are saying something (what, I'm not sure) quite different. Same-sex marriages do not reflect the image of Christ loving His church. Perhaps a same-sex marriage reflects a more idolatrous, self-absorbed model of self-love.

9. Assorted words of advice to Christian husbands.

Husbands: You have married a fellow image bearer (Genesis 1:27); she is married to you *but she belongs to God!*

Husbands remember: Your wife ain't your mama!

Men: Give your wife and kids the very best of your discretionary time.¹²⁷

Husbands, are you committed to making your wife successful?

¹²⁷ Alvin L. Reid, *Raising the Bar* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2004), 158.

Ephesians 5:28: The love of the husband for his wife should be sensitive. Danny Akin suggests a husband needs a “Marital Radar System” that stays sensitive to his wife.

Ephesians 5:29 (NASB): For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also *does* the church.

Husbands, does your wife know that outside of Jesus no one matters more to you?

Men, surprise your wife with acts of love and affection.

Yes, God wants the husband to be the spiritual leader. But remember, you are the spiritual leader of a *team*, and you had best remember that you are a team.

F. Making It Work Everyday

Ephesians 5:33 (NASB): Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must *see to it* that she respects her husband.

Here are a few words of advice for Christian couples based on Ephesians 5:21 – 33:

1. Your first and primary focus should be on your responsibilities, and not your spouse's. By that, I mean that wives should spend the majority of their time working to be obedient to God's instruction to them and not endlessly complain about a husband's shortcomings. Likewise, husbands should focus on loving leadership, and not spend inordinate time complaining about a wife's lack of respect.
2. Keep in mind the reciprocal balance in these verses is summed up in Ephesians 5:33: Husbands are to love their wives and wives are to respect their husbands. Since God designed humans, he knows the deepest need

for a wife is to be loved unconditionally and the deepest need for a husband is to be respected.

3. Wives: When was the last time you said, “Honey, you are a good man. I love you, but more than that I *respect* you for the man you are.” Do you communicate to the children: “Your father is a good man. I respect him and so should you.” Do you communicate to other people that you respect your husband? Or do you complain about him in public?

4. Husbands: When was the last time you sacrificed for your family’s sake? Have you said to your wife, “Honey, I am blessed to have you as my wife. I want to show you that love: Tonight, I’ll put the children to bed and I’ll wash the clothes. It is a joy to do this for you.” Husbands, your first area of leadership is the family altar: Have you led your wife and children in Bible-reading and prayer? Husbands, do you understand that our “toys” – 4-wheelers, hot-rods, boats, motorcycles, guitars, firearms – all are less important than the family? Being a responsible male means we provide for our family first and only worry about these things later.

5. Remember, your marriage covenant is supposed to be a picture of Christ’s covenant with the Church. Christ’s loves and forgives us when we sin and fail. A Christian marriage will model this sort of forgiveness. In my own marriage with Lisa, the most important verse for both of us regarding marriage has been Ephesians 4:32, “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.”

6. Finally, as a Christian man, I think I have something to say to my fellow brothers. There have been times when I have met men who thought cleaning dishes, cleaning a toilet, or changing a diaper were all duties relegated to a wife and that a “real” man doesn’t do such things. If you think Ephesians 5:22 – 33 is all about making sure the wife does all the housework and caring for children and that men are liberated from such tasks, then you have failed to understand the Bible. Though I don’t always

agree with Martin Luther on some ethical issues, he has a helpful comment here on this topic in “The Estate of Marriage” which he wrote in 1522:

Now you tell me, when a father goes ahead and washes diapers or performs some other mean task for his child, and someone ridicules him as an effeminate fool – though that father is acting in the spirit just described and in Christian faith – my dear fellow you tell me, which of the two is most keenly ridiculing the other? God, with all his angels and creatures, is smiling – not because that father is washing diapers, but because he is doing so in Christian faith. Those who sneer at him and see only the task but not the faith are ridiculing God with all his creatures, as the biggest fool on earth.¹²⁸

In a marriage lived according to these truths, the love between husband and wife will show itself in listening to each other's viewpoints, valuing each other's gifts, wisdom, and desires, honoring one another in public and in private, and always seeking to bring benefit, not harm, to one another.¹²⁹

G. What about “platonic” friendships after I am married?

From time to time I am asked about the acceptability of continuing platonic friendships with someone of the opposite sex after marriage. A friend can be defined as an individual who is kindly disposed towards us and behaves toward that person in an amicable manner, expresses an interest in that person's needs, and goes out of his or her way to help the friend in difficult situations. A platonic friendship is one between members of the opposite sex which is purportedly free from sexual desire and is only concerned with nurturing the other person's best interests. Describing a relationship as *platonic* implies some deeper level of sharing and interaction than merely expressing goodwill to someone when we happen to interact at work or school, but suggests intentional development of the friendship

¹²⁸ Martin Luther, “The Estate of Marriage,” *Luther's Works*, vol. 45, Walther I. Brandt, ed. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), 40.

¹²⁹ I got this paragraph from Campus Crusade. Art Toalston, “SBC's Stance on Marriage and Family Joined by Campus Crusade for Christ,” *Baptist Press*, July 29, 1999.

for the purposes of knowing the other person better. Sometimes these are called spiritual friendships because of a common faith in Christ or a shared passion to serve the Lord. Sometimes these friendships emerge from common tragedies in the past (e.g., both friends had an abusive father), a common wound, or even a common enemy.

Of course as young people, we all have such friendships. I attended Hiram Elementary School in Hiram, GA and had the same basic core group of classmates for all six years. We all had mumps together, we saw each other get in fights, and we endured bad teachers together. When I went to the county's one magnet high school, I still considered both girls and boys from my elementary school days as friends. Nowadays, I rarely see my old school friends unless it happens to be at a funeral or our paths cross when at a restaurant (usually Chic Fil A). When I meet my old classmates, boys and girls, I still think of them as friends.

There is an element of Christian love in all friendships. Proverbs 17:17 says, "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity." In concern for us, a true friend will give us not only encouragement but correction, "Faithful are the wounds of a friend, But deceitful are the kisses of an enemy." (Proverbs 27:6) When someone who is a perceived friend fails us, the bitterness is quite severe and it amplifies our frustration with life's difficulties. In Job's grief, he lamented that even his friends had failed him: "I am a joke to my friends, the one who called on God and He answered him; The just *and* blameless *man* is a joke." (Job 12:4)

But when we get married, the nature of our friendships with people of the opposite sex changes. Whether we like it or not, it is very common among single adults for friendships with people of the opposite sex to have romantic attraction subtly running just beneath the surface. A 2012 article in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* studied 88 pairs of cross-sex friends and made some surprising discoveries. Young males reported more attraction to their female friend than the young females did toward their male friend. This was true regardless of whether or not each was in a

“relationship” with someone else or not. Interestingly, feeling attracted to a cross-sex friend was associated with lower levels of satisfaction with one’s romantic partner (particularly among middle-aged adults who were likely to be married).¹³⁰ The stronger the cross-sex friendship, the less satisfied and attracted people are to their spouse.

Christians should be friends to others and offer encouragement and help in life’s difficulties. But when we are married, it is very unwise to attempt to share intimate, personal details of life with someone of the opposite sex. Sharing these things can lead to romantic attraction and sets us up for temptation. Temptations are sure to come to all of us; it is foolish intentionally to create situations which make temptation worse.

Christians are also called to “abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:22), which the venerable KJV translates as “abstain from all appearance of evil.” Intimate lunches and long walks with someone of the opposite sex sends a message to a watching world that we enjoy sharing the personal details of life with someone other than our spouse. Our intentions may be innocent, but in the minds of others it raises questions about the strength of our commitment to the marriage covenant.

I have been married for thirty-five very happy years. Never in all those years of marriage have said to Lisa, “Honey, I’m having lunch with Sally Sue Smith, that girl I used to hang out with before we got married.” The thought has never crossed my mind. Christian maturity dictates that my relationships with other women like that ended when I asked Lisa to marry me.

H. Summary Statement

1. Marriage is God’s idea and not merely a social invention.

¹³⁰ April Bleske-Reчек, Erin Somers, Cierra Micke, Leah Erickson, Lindsay Matteson, Corey Stocco, Brittany Schumacher, and Laura Ritchie, “Benefit or Burden? Attraction in cross-sex friendship,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 29.5 (2012): 591.

2. Marriage is a covenant and is neither a contract nor a sacrament.
3. Marriage is designed for one man and one woman in a lifelong commitment.
4. Marriage entails specific roles for both the husband and the wife.
5. Marriage is a picture of Christ's love for the church.

Please notice that the last two sections – one addressing romance (sex) and one addressing appropriate roles in marriage – are both needed for a successful marriage. Outside of the industrialized Western nations devotion, commitment, and role relations in marriage are what cultures emphasize. In the West, romance becomes the sum and substance of marriage, and if the feeling of romance wanes, the popular opinion is that it is permissible to end the marriage. Somewhere the two concepts must be incorporated: Without romance, marriage is a drudgery, but without the will and commitment to love another in a sacrificial way, marriage is a mockery.

Last Updated March 13, 2023