

Biblical view of marriage

The term marriage in its various parts of speech occurs in the Bible 153 times. The first occurrence of the term comes just after the destruction of Sodom. That said the language of marriage occurs much more frequently. When you add to it the numbers of instances that Husband (143) and wife (478) in its various parts of speech occur you begin to see how foundational marriage between one man and one woman is to the biblical world.

Old Testament

Faithfulness is an expectation in marriage. This is clear from the Ten Commandments. “Thou shall not commit adultery” Ex 20:14 and Deut. 5:18. What does this mean? According to Luther’s Small Catechism, “We are to fear and love God, so that we lead pure and decent lives in word and deed, and each of us loves and honors his or her spouse.” BC 353:12. The clear context here is fidelity and the clear ordering of sexual intimacy.

Additionally to honoring one’s spouse, keeping the marriage promises of life-long commitment is also a reflection of love for one’s neighbor. What this means is that if you genuinely love your neighbor you are not going to sleep around with your neighbor’s spouse.

Most marriages we see in the Bible are monogamous. However, there are a few circumstances where this is not the case. Esau had two Hittite wives, Judith and Basemath (Gen. 26:34). Jacob had two wives and two concubines (Gen. 29:21-30:13). Only during the Monarchal period does polygyny become more prevalent and then primarily among the kings. David had six wives: Abigail, and Ahinoam or Jezreel (1 Sam. 25:39-43), Maacah, Haggith, Abital, Eglah (2 Sam. 3:2-5). This does not include his adulterous affair with Bathsheba. The most well known polygynist of the Bible is Solomon who is said to have 700 wives and 300 concubines. The reason for kings to have so many wives was to cement alliances by marrying foreign princesses. It needs to be noted however, that even among kings it was not considered a proper attitude to have so many wives as it would introduce a bad moral influence. “And he (in reference to a king) must not acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself.” Deut. 17:17. (For more information see the Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, Supplementary Volume. Pg. 575)

New Testament

One of the first places we start in looking at marriage in the New Testament is from the Gospel of Mark. This is widely held by scholars to be the first of the four Gospels to be written and that Matthew and Luke, given their similarities borrowed extensively from Mark’s material. Keep in mind, the Gospels are not written until some 35 plus years following Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Mark 10:2-9

We come to this point of the Gospel where the religious leaders are challenging Jesus' teaching and are looking for any inconsistencies between him and Jewish law. The question they bring concerns divorce. "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" Mark 10:2b. Jesus starts his reply with asking them what Moses taught. The Pharisees go back to Deut. 24:1-4, which we'll come to in a moment.

Jesus' takes them back to the creation accounts themselves. God's intent for marriage is that the two (one man and one woman) become one flesh. The commitment of husband and wife is the normative relationship.

Now, those who lobby for gay marriage will be quick to point out that no where here or in the parallel accounts does Jesus forbid the loving union between two people of the same sex. However, by holding up the normative position of God from the creation account, such a reading is difficult to support. The plain sense of the text clearly indicates what Jesus is doing. Jesus is teaching that God's desire continues to be that a marriage relationship be between one man and one woman. "Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." Mark 6:9.

When it comes then to the issue of divorce, Jesus connects this with the sixth commandment. Except for reasons of unchastity divorce was not permitted. In fact, if you divorce and remarry, Jesus equates this with adultery. Jesus also does not limit this simply to his Jewish audience. In Mark's account, Jesus mentions that if the wife divorces her husband and marries another she too is guilty of adultery. For Jews the women had no right to initiate divorce. This teaching is directed at Roman women who were able to initiate divorce.

When looking at the Deuteronomy 24 text what is clear here is that a certificate of divorce could be written by the man for very little reason, "...but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable (or indecent) about her..." Deut. 24:1b. The certificate of divorce would be a protection for the woman allowing her at some point in the future to remarry.

For the Pharisees they would see this reinterpretation as a threat to their traditional understanding of Moses' teaching. What Jesus does in addressing divorce is to object to the triviality that men may take toward their marriage. By referring to the reason for adultery as the only reason for divorce, Jesus returns to a stricter interpretation of the Deuteronomy passage. Jesus was interpreting a particular situation. Thus, Jesus is upholding the spirit of the law as opposed to those looking solely at the letter of the law. Additionally, when scripture seems at odds with each other such as Genesis 2:24 in relation to Deut. 24:1-4, Jesus makes it clear that what has priority or what is normative is Gen. 2:24.

The issue of what constitutes divorce from a Biblical perspective must also be carefully applied. To further illustrate what this means I am turning to a passage that has

a lot to say about marriage, but one that has also been misunderstood at various points both individually, and through the church.

Ephesians 5:21-33

In Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus, he outlines what our belief in Jesus means for the believer. The end of chapter three urges prayer for those hearing this letter. Chapter four begins with an urging to live in the "...unity of the Spirit..."(Ep. 4:3). There is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Ep. 4:5). From here the rest of the letter describes what our new life in Christ will look like. This is different from the life of the Pagan which is filled with a host of undesirable behaviors among them: fornication, greed, obscenity, drunkenness, etc.

Verse 21 sets the tone in that this section of text is directed at all people toward Christ. We are subject to one another not because we are subservient to each other, but we are reverent to Christ who is the head of the church (the body of Christ) and who desires what is best for us.

Verses 22-24 have been greatly misapplied throughout the history of the church. First, let us consider the plain meaning of the text. This means looking at what the text is addressing at the time the letter was read in Ephesus.

In Paul's time, women were considered property. She was the possession of her husband. Compared to the writing of Deuteronomy until Paul's life, divorce had become much easier to obtain. A more liberal meaning of the word indecency or objectionable as referenced in the Deuteronomy passage gave man more of latitude for divorcing his wife.

What is dangerous about how this text is applied is that it has been used to elevate men over women to the point where abusive behavior on the part of the husband would be justified. This is a danger in pointing to simply one or two verses out of scripture. One can miss the greater context. The issue of being subject to one another as stated in verse 21. Furthermore, the call in verse 25 is for husbands to "love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her;". This passage is not about who is in control but is a call of both the man and woman to live in loving relationship with each other as Christ lives in a loving relationship with the church. The focus of this love is on giving, not receiving. "He who loves his wife loves himself" vs. 28b.

Paul as he does in other writings highlights Christ's connection to the church in a way that is akin to the marriage of husband and wife. The ideal here is Christ's relationship with the church and that is what husbands and wives are striving for in their loving relationship with each other. Paul reinforces this by referencing Genesis 2:24.

First Cor. 7:1-5

One of the first things to keep in mind regarding Paul's context here is the deeply held Christian belief about the imminent end of the age. It is firmly believed that Christ will return during their lifetime. The issues then are how to live faithfully until Christ

does return. It is in such a context that Paul repeatedly urges this congregation to “remain as you are” (see 7:20, 24, 26, 38, and 40).

In verse one, we see an ideal. “It is well for a man not to touch a woman.” Here Paul is quoting from a letter that he received from the church in Corinth. As one will see, this is not an exclusive position thus allowing for other possibilities. Paul’s preference would be that no one would marry, thus remaining celibate. Again, this must be kept in Christian overall context regarding the expectation of Jesus immanent return making the issue of marriage irrelevant.

However for those who felt sexual urges it was better for them to marry and live in fidelity to his spouse than live a life of promiscuity. For Paul, sex is to be agreed upon mutually by husband and wife, neither of whom should use this as a means of exerting power. A fundamental reciprocity needs to be present regarding when to engage and when to abstain from sex. Sexuality in marriage is necessary to maintain self-control. (J. Paul Sampley, New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. 10:870.)

Marriage is the second best option for the Christian. Why second best. For Paul this is an issue of pastoral care. He wants the community to be “free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided.” 1 Cor. 7:32-34a. This same is true of the married wife. What Paul is doing is calling the church to “...promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord.” 1 Cor. 7:35c.

Additionally, given the immanent end of the world, Paul is concerned for those who will bear the added worries of what will become of one’s spouse and children. Whatever one’s marital status it will not have any direct bearing on one’s relation to God. (J. Paul Sampley, New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. 10:870.)

In as much as we have commented on the teaching of divorce, it is here that Paul reaffirms what we have heard in other parts of scripture. It comes in the context of whether the Christian should divorce the non-Christian spouse. Paul’s statement in verses 12 through 16 is that the believing spouse has the opportunity to bear witness to the gospel in the marital relationship. If however, the unbeliever chooses to separate, “...let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound.” Note that separate is not the same as divorce. An agreement of separation allows the woman to free herself from the influence of the unbelieving husband since she would be unable to divorce him.

2 Cor. 6:14

This verse brings to mind Paul’s advise to believers who married unbelievers that he addressed in First Corinthians 7:12-16. Here, Paul’s advice has changed. Again, out of concern for one’s relationship to God which is the priority for the Christian, marriage between believer and non-believer is strongly discouraged.

It is likely that this change from Paul is the result of dialog with the church in Corinth following his first letter. From earlier parts of Second Corinthians, Paul's first letter was not well received. This distress weighs heavily upon Paul as he writes again to Corinth. (See 2 Cor. 2:4)

Hebrews 13:1-4

This text begins with the exhortation "Let mutual love continue." The first twelve chapters depict a life of faith that calls us to respond in love for God and for each other. It is to the latter that this chapter concludes the letter.

What follows are examples of mutual love. Mutual love includes hospitality to strangers (vs. 2), a hospitality that was extended by Lot in Genesis 19 and strongly rejected by the men of Sodom. Remembering the prisoner in such a way that the readers can identify with prisoners as ones like them who suffered (vs. 3) is another example of mutual love. Mutual love also calls for the Hebrew community to refrain from the "love of money" (vs. 5) as well as to remember (vs. 7) and obey your leaders (vs. 17).

Verse four directly addresses the topic of marriage as an example of mutual love. "Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers." (vs. 4). This statement reflects marriage as an honorable estate, instituted by God and should be kept free from all forms of sexual immorality.

We are reminded that adultery is not permitted and violates Jesus teaching on marriage as we heard in Mark 6, in which Jesus affirms God's intent for man and wife from the beginning going back to Genesis 2:24.

What is included in this verse is also an important reminder to all Christians. The role of judge is not given to the church. God is the one who serves as judge. We may not condone sinful behavior and we are called to teach in accord with the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. However, judgments about any individual or groups of individuals reside with God, who in turn has given that over to his Son Jesus.

Marriage analogy:

Throughout both the Old and New Testaments comes the image of marriage to describe the relationship between God and God's people, first the Jews and then the Christians. Some OT examples include Jeremiah 2:2 and Hosea 2:19-20. It is also true that when the people of God sinned it has been described as adultery such as in Ezekiel 23:37, Isaiah 54:5-6, etc. The clearest NT reference is found in Ephesians 5:31-33.