

Marriage...

Should I or Shouldn't I...?

(By Bassam Sowmi)

The institution of marriage is in constant change, continuously being modified and altered in unique and unpredictable ways. It has its detractors and its supporters, and some elements from both points of view reside within many of us.

In a society where the terms “marriage” and “matrimony” carry old fashioned and negative connotations, many couples are opting to postpone marriage indefinitely, preferring to live together first, with the “*try before we buy*” attitude. This attitudinal change has been gaining momentum across the world at such a rate that the general populous now accepts this new life style as the norm. In fact many find it quite weird – even ludicrous – that we as Christians would actually entertain the possibility of marrying someone that we hadn't first lived with.

In many cases today, people are just not seeing why marriage is necessary at all. *“If the person I choose to live with turns out to be right for me then I will continue living with this person as if married... we may even have children. Does signing a piece of paper mean we love each other more? What's the point of getting married at all, it's just an old fashioned concept.”*

It is true that marriage has its roots in antiquity, but does this mean that it is an outdated concept, or is it still applicable today?

There are many people who call themselves authorities on marriage and divorce, however despite all these professional opinions, the marriage bond is strongest when the married couple bases their relationship on, and maintains it under the guidance of God and the Holy Bible.

WHAT DOES THE HOLY BIBLE SAY ABOUT MARRIAGE?

Let us start with a comparison between the social and Biblical definitions of marriage.

Society defines marriage as: “*a relationship between a man and a woman in which society judges it is legitimate for them to live together.*” However what society judges as legitimate may vary from that which is portrayed in the Bible.

The Bible does not define marriage as such, but a definition can be derived from the following words of our Lord Jesus Christ. *“But from the beginning of the creation, God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh; so then they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.” (Mark 10:6-9).*

This implies that:

1. Marriage is specifically for two people of the opposite and not the same sex.
2. The two shall become one in such a way that is mysterious - “they are no longer two”.
3. They are joined by God.
4. Once two people are joined - or married - they cannot be separated - or divorced.

MARRIAGE IS A SACRAMENT

Since the verses above are the words of God himself, it is understandable that our church cannot accept any other modern approach that is of the contrary. In fact, the church considers marriage so important that it is one of the seven sacraments.

What is a Sacrament? A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ.

So, a sacrament must consist of:

1. A visible sign or signs.
2. A spiritual grace.
3. It must have been instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ.

How is marriage a sacrament? The visible is the bride, the groom, the priest, the deacons, the ceremony, and the prayers. The invisible, is the Holy Spirit that unites them so that the two become one in the Lord. It is a unity of Spirit, thoughts, feelings & the flesh. St Paul says: *“This is a great mystery.” (Ephesians 5:32).* Marriage was blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ at the wedding at Cana and in many of His teachings.

FORBIDDEN MARRIAGES

Having established that marriage has been blessed by God as well as our church and it is the correct foundation for a life long relationship, we now need to know how to choose our life partner.

The best way to do this is by the process of elimination. The Holy Bible forbids us from marrying certain types or groups of people, such as:

❖ **Certain Relatives**

Here the Holy Bible curses all types of incest and forbids sexual relationships – not to mention marriage – to any one of the following people.

The nakedness of your father or the nakedness of your mother you shall not uncover... of your father's wife... of your sister, the daughter of your father, or the daughter of your mother... of your son's daughter or

your daughter's daughter... of your father's wife's daughter... your father's sister... your mother's sister... your father's brother. You shall not approach his wife... your daughter-in-law... your brother's wife... a woman and her daughter, nor shall you take her son's daughter or her daughter's daughter... Nor shall you take a woman as a rival to her sister, to uncover her nakedness while the other is alive. (Leviticus 18:1-18).

We can now see why St John The Baptist was so vehement in his attack of King Herod. *"For Herod had laid hold of John and bound him, and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. Because John had said to him, 'It is not lawful for you to have her.'"* (Matthew 14:3-4)

❖ HOMOSEXUAL MARRIAGES

"You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination." (Leviticus 18:22).

How much clearer can the Holy Bible be on homosexuality? It calls it "an abomination". This means that the act is a terrible sin that is detested by God. Look what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah because of the prevalence of this life style.

"Now the two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and he bowed himself with his face toward the ground... the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both old and young, all the people from every quarter, surrounded the house. And they called to Lot and said to him, 'Where are the men {the two angels} who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may know them carnally.' So Lot went out to them through the doorway, shut the door behind him, and said, 'Please, my brethren, do not do so wickedly!'" (Genesis 19:1-5).

So the angels responded as follows: *'For we will destroy this place, because the outcry against them has grown great before the face of the LORD, and the LORD has sent us to destroy it.'* (Genesis 19:13).

This response was not due to the fact that they were angels – as the people thought they were men – but it was due to the depth of their homosexual lusts.

St Paul also calls homosexuality shameful and an error that will be judged and penalised.

"Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due." (Romans 1:27).

❖ MARRYING FROM OTHER RELIGIONS

There was a person who once asked Jesus what the greatest commandment of all is... *"Jesus said to him, 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.'"* (Matthew 22:37).

If the greatest commandment is to love our Lord Jesus totally and completely, how can we possibly think of marrying anyone who doesn't? How can we marry anyone who doesn't read the Bible or come to church. How can we marry anyone from another religion who has not been baptised and therefore has not received the Holy Spirit... can the Holy Spirit within us possibly coexist with one who is void of His existence?

In the Holy Bible God repeatedly warns us against marrying from any group who does not love Him or who are from another religion.

"Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods; so the anger of the LORD will be aroused against you and destroy you suddenly." (Deuteronomy 7:3-4).

Also see (Joshua 23:1-13).

❖ MARRYING MORE THAN ONE PERSON AT A TIME.

Despite the fact that most of us come from primarily Moslem countries, marrying more than one wife has never been something that we would

consider. Even so, we must make it clear that Christianity forbids this practice totally and completely.

Even though in the Old Testament, men like Abraham, David and Solomon did have more than one wife, this was never sanctioned by God. It was only out of the weaknesses within humans that this occurred. God's stand on the matter is clear from the following Old Testament verse which discusses the pitfalls of having more than one wife.

"Neither shall he multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away." (Deuteronomy 17:17).

Our Lord Jesus also spoke about this matter.

"But from the beginning of the creation, God 'made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh; so then they are no longer two, but one flesh.' Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate." (Mark 10:6-9).

Notice that Jesus said that *"the two shall become one flesh"*. It wasn't *"the three, four, or five shall become one flesh"*, but *"the two shall become one flesh"*.

Also St Paul said *"...let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband."* (1 Corinthians 7:2).

❖ MARRYING DIVORCEES

"But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery." (Matthew 5:32).

In the above verse, Our Lord Jesus is saying that divorce for any reason except sexual immorality (or in more modern terms, having an affair) is forbidden. He goes on to say that we cannot marry anyone who is divorced for any other reason than sexual immorality, because divorce for any other reason is forbidden. Our Lord Jesus confirms this again in the verse below.

So He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." (Mark 10:11-12).

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF MARRIAGE?

So what is the point of it all? Why was marriage invented?

❖ SHARING IN CREATION

God wants us to share in creating life. God could create millions of Adams and Eves, over and over and over again without marriage or the help of humans. However, He desired, out of His great love for us, to have us share with Him in this process of the creation of life through marriage. How great is His love that He will allow us to partake in an event so wonderful and beautiful as the creation of life. *"Then God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply.'" (Genesis 1:28).*

St Paul says that *"This is a great mystery." (Ephesians 5:32).*

❖ BUILDING SMALL CHURCHES

There is nothing more beautiful than a Christian couple praying together with their Christian children. I was very fortunate to be in a room one night with a friend of mine and her one year old and two year old boys. Just before bedtime, the three of them stood to pray with their hands raised to heaven. Their mother started to pray by saying *"Dear Lord, please bless this house and this family. Bless daddy and mummy, David (the 1yr old) and Daniel (the 2yr old). Help daddy and mummy at work. Help us not to be naughty. No screaming at mummy and daddy, no fighting, no..."* and their mother continued bringing to her sons' attention a whole list of things to be careful of. I was partly amused and partly touched to find that the boys joined in with her and said: *"and no hitting Daniel mummy"...* *"yes David, and not hitting Daniel"...* *"and no kicking David mummy"...* *"yes Daniel, and no kicking David"...* *"and no biting mummy"...* *"yes David and no biting."* And so on and so on. The

prayer continued a little further in this simple form and then ended with mum leading them in the Lord's Prayer with the boy's joining in to the best of their ability... *"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name..."*

Our Lord Jesus said *"For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them." (Matthew 18:20).* And it is for this reason that this little home can be seen as a small church. The family pray together and fast together, all in the name of God – so, according to His promise, He is in their midst. Imagine how much stronger the Christian church would be if there were more of these little churches. This is another purpose of marriage, i.e. to bring up children in the faith of the Lord.

Marriage Roles

❖ THE ROLE'S OF THE HUSBAND AND WIFE

"Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the church;... Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her,... husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This is a great mystery,... let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband." (Ephesians 5:22-33).

This must be one of the most misunderstood, and from a woman's perspective, one of the most chauvinistic passages in the Bible. Men use it to their advantage at every possible opportunity, whilst women wonder why it was written in the Bible in the first place and wish it wasn't. The reason this passage creates such controversy is because it is basically misunderstood.

The most important verses in the passage are that *"the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church"*. and that husbands *"love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her"*.

The role of the husband is not to rule with an iron fist, whilst waving a bible opened at *"wives, submit to your husbands"* in his wife's face, rather to love his wife as Christ loved the church.

If the husband is truly Christ-like in his treatment of his wife. If he treats her with Christ-like love and gentleness and loves her to such a degree that he would die for her – as Christ died for the one's that He loved – then his wife will gladly submit to him in any decision that he makes, without any problem or dispute.

❖ THE WIFE'S ROLE

The wife's role is self explanatory and should be expected by both partners in a Christian marriage.

"and let the wife see that she respects her husband."

King Solomon in the book of Proverbs also speaks about the "virtuous wife".

"Who can find a virtuous wife? For her worth is far above rubies. The heart of her husband safely trusts her;... She does him good and not evil All the days of her life. She extends her hand to the poor, Yes, she reaches out her hands to the needy. Strength and honor are her clothing; ... She opens her mouth with wisdom, And on her tongue is the law of kindness. She watches over the ways of her household,... Her children rise up and call her blessed; Her husband also, and he praises her: Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing, But a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised." (Proverbs 31:10-30).

In summary, if both partners hold to these rules which are written in the Holy Bible, their marriage will be one of lasting happiness.

❖ ARE BOTH PARTNER'S EQUAL?

The question of equality and inequality regularly rears its head, but the fact is

that this question should not be an issue at all. It is not a matter of knowing with whom the authority lies but rather understanding the roles that God has given us and we should try living by them to the best of our abilities.

“And the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him.’... Then the rib which the LORD God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man. And Adam said: ‘This is now bone of my bones And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man.’ Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” (Genesis 2:18-24).

Notice that God did not make Eve from a bone in Adam’s head for then she would be above him. He didn’t make her from a bone of his foot or she would be below him. He made her from a bone next to his heart so that she would stand beside him that they may support and love each other, **“and shall become one flesh”**.

CHOOSING A PARTNER

Ok, now we know what the role of marriage is as well as who is off limits, but we still want to know how to choose the right person to marry.

When we choose to get married it is important that appearance, money and social status are not at the top of the priority list. When you marry it is important that your partner is:

- a) A Christian.
- b) Has a strong belief in God.
- c) Loves God with all their heart, soul and mind.
- d) The actions, friends and lifestyle of this person must reflect this love for God.
- e) Regularly goes to church.

Without that strong foundation, it is extremely difficult for a marriage based upon Christian beliefs to flourish. Your choice of a life partner should be an informed one. It is important that the person is pure of thought, pure of mind and pure of heart. Without such a foundation, one cannot be certain how

the children of a marriage will be brought up.

Convincing yourself that *“we are in love and that will see us through... it’s all that matters”* is an extremely weak foundation to base a **lifelong** relationship on. Remember that according to the words of Our Lord Jesus, once you are married, there is no backing out, so it is imperative that we base our decision on our mind and not only our heart. One very loving bishop once said *“when choosing your life partner think a lot and feel a little.”*

❖ THE ENGAGEMENT PERIOD

The most important time before making a decision to marry is the engagement period. Despite what we think, the church sees the engagement period as a testing period. It is a time to test whether your wife or husband to be fits the above criteria. If it becomes clear that your selection is not suitable there is absolutely no shame in terminating the engagement. It is better to end the relationship now than be married to the wrong person forever.

During the engagement period try to go to church together, to pray together, and to read the bible together. These steps will set the foundations for a long, fruitful and blessed marriage.