

A gift of God:

Biblical reflections on marriage

By David and Heather Jackman

Summary

The broad and pervasive 'trend away from marriage' has far-reaching implications for society as a whole, as well as for Christians who come under pressure to conform to cultural standards. In contrast to the short-term and low-commitment relationships that have fast become the norm, the Bible holds out a positive vision for marriage, based on God's covenant relationship with his people, and offers us the hope of communicating an attractive model of marriage to those who adhere to very different values.

Introduction

Marriage is in crisis. It is not simply that many marriages end in divorce, although many do (some 42 per cent of marriages in the UK with almost half affecting children under 16).¹ Increasingly, people are opting out of marriage altogether (cohabitation in the UK doubled over the period 1996 to 2012, to reach a total of 5.9 million people).² The emergence of a kind of 'bonded independence' in relationships, particularly among the under-25s, where the quality of the relationship trumps any obligation to longer-term commitment ('Is it working for me?') reflects the perceived value of keeping all options open. Despite this, the majority of young people still want to get married, and the significance they place on it is reflected not only by the cost of the average wedding (£21,000 in 2014)³ but in the delay that now tends to happen before marriage, with 80 per cent of those marrying previously cohabiting – often as a way of testing their relationship before making such a major commitment.⁴ This is also seen in the delay in having children, or deciding not to have them at all. Many who put off parenthood today have experienced the pain of their own parents' divorce. 'Marriages can be unscrambled; parenthood cannot.'⁵ In short, in various ways, there is a 'trend away from marriage', and it is a trend which is most marked among those on lower incomes.⁶

The various ways in which personal choice, independence and sexual freedom express themselves come at the price of fractured and unstable relationships.

All this is happening against a backdrop of increasing individualisation and consumerisation of personal and sexual relationships. The 'hook-up culture', in which one-night stands and other casual sexual encounters are encouraged, appears to be an evolution of a mindset that values sexual freedom and choice, but seeks to dissociate it from commitment and even the emotional engagement of traditional couple relationship.⁷ This

1 Relate, 'Separation and Divorce'. See www.relate.org.uk/files/relate/separation-divorce-factsheet-jan2014.pdf. Figure derived from England & Wales, Office for National Statistics, 2013.

2 Office for National Statistics: short report 'Co-habitation in the UK 2012'. Released 1.11.12; accessed online 29.6.15.

3 www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-28368323.

4 Office for National Statistics, 'Short report: Cohabitation in the UK, 2012'. www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/family-demography/families-and-households/2012/cohabitation-rpt.html. The ONS report on 'Cohabitation' cited above indicates that, while cohabitation represents 11.7% of the population over 16, in the 25–34 age group, cohabitation rises to 27%.

5 See 'The relationships era' by Hugh Mackay in *Case Magazine* 39 (2014 'Marriage Reconsidered' issue).

6 See www.marriagefoundation.org.uk/Web/OnlineStore/Product.aspx?ID=183

7 See, e.g., Wendy Shalit, *A Return to Modesty*, Free Press, 1999; Richard E. Simmons III, *Sex at First Sight: Understanding the Modern Hook Up Culture*, Clovercroft Publishing, 2015.

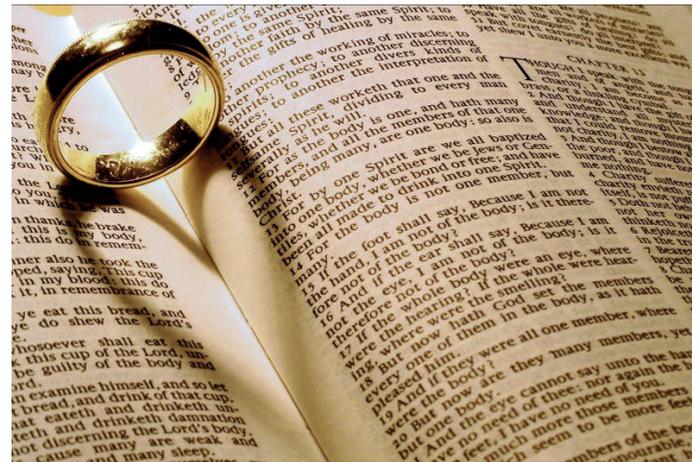
process arguably began in the 1960s with the availability of reliable contraception but, more recently, developments in communications technology have catalysed this consumerisation of sex, with apps like Tinder making ‘hooking up’ more akin to online shopping. We have also seen the Ashley Madison phenomenon, a dating site specialising in extramarital relationships (its tagline is ‘Life is short. Have an affair’). Before its website was hacked in July 2015 and millions of users’ personal details were leaked on the internet, the company was set to float on the London stock exchange at a valuation of up to £134 million. Nonetheless, the site attracted hundreds of thousands of new users in the month following the hack. Ashley Madison taps into a Zeitgeist: a sexual relationship should suit your requirements, rather than your desires being subject to the restrictions of your existing relationship.

The various ways in which personal choice, independence and sexual freedom express themselves come at the price of fractured and unstable relationships – because ‘stability requires the genie of autonomous choice to be kept firmly inside its bottle.’⁸ But that genie is well and truly out. Grasping the importance of marriage for social stability, the government has made well-intentioned but largely ineffective attempts to shore up marriage. These have included the ‘marriage allowance’ (a transferable tax allowance for low-income couples) and the redefinition of marriage⁹ which, amongst other things, was promoted on the grounds that commitment (regardless of the couple’s genders) should be incentivised.¹⁰ Speaking in the same-sex marriage debate in 2012, the then Culture Secretary said, ‘Most people would agree that marriage is a good thing; choosing to spend the rest of your life with someone you love brings commitment and stability. What’s more it helps bind society together and strengthens our communities.’¹¹ However, the government has to tread a cautious line between affirming marriage for reasons of social cohesion and the politically damaging risk of appearing to criticise single parents and alternative lifestyles.

The shift in the legal definition of marriage to include ‘same-sex marriage’ lies at the forefront of a range of attempts to redefine marriage. Now plural marriage, in which more than two people may be bound together in a relationship recognised by law as marriage, has its advocates.¹² Meanwhile, regardless of legal debates, the idea that each couple should decide the parameters of their ‘marriage’ is championed: in *The New I Do* possible frameworks include the ‘starter marriage’ (where the relationship is renewed or terminated after a set number of years) or the ‘open marriage’ (in which one or both partners permit extramarital affairs by their partner).¹³

All this is a long way from the view of marriage expressed by all branches of the Christian church in their wedding services, which affirm the voluntary and exclusive union,

for life, of one man and one woman, a gift of God’s common grace in creation. With so many countervailing messages, even Christians may be sceptical about the relevance and goodness of the biblical vision for marriage. This paper affirms the biblical teaching on marriage and considers how these foundational principles can be applied in our everyday experience. It is a sad reality that many Christians struggle under the same relentless pressure that non-Christians face in their marriages. Nevertheless, the most convincing evidential argument for marriage being both right and good as the Creator’s gift, rather than a human construct or merely a cultural phenomenon, will be the quality of our Christian marriages.¹⁴



The marriage debate takes us to the core of biblical theology: to the nature of humanity created in the image of God and as a reflection of the relationship between Christ and his church. The spiritual significance of marriage runs through the Bible, from creation to the presentation of the church as the bride to Christ in Revelation. We might add, though this would need a separate paper to unpack, that the significance of marriage for social cohesion and economic sustainability is reflected in many of the laws of the Old Testament. Living out the principles that lie at the heart of the biblical pattern of marriage requires concrete practical application (and this paper explores a number of practical ways in which marriages can be strengthened and supported by married couples and local churches). Ultimately, however, it requires radical change within the heart, the control centre of our being. It requires nothing less than the power of God’s Spirit to woo us from our alternative value systems of self-fulfilment and self-satisfaction and enable us to live by the divine priority of self-sacrificing love. The call, then, is for Christians to be countercultural both in our thinking (grasping the importance of marriage from a theological perspective) and in our lifestyle (living out what we profess).

8 Julian Rivers in ‘Redefining Marriage: the case for caution’. *Cambridge Papers* Vol. 21 No 3, September 2012, available at www.jubilee-centre.org.

9 Julian Rivers, *op. cit.*

10 See www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/10200636/1-want-to-export-gay-marriage-around-the-world-says-David-Cameron.html

11 Maria Miller MP, quoted in ‘Same Sex Marriage’, a paper produced by Keep Marriage Special, June 2013.

12 Ronald C. Den Otter, *In Defense of Plural Marriage*, Cambridge University Press, 2015. Ultimately, he proposes a new semi-contractual marital model that would provide legal recognition for a wide range of intimate relationships.

13 Susan Pease Gadoua and Vicki Larson, *The New I Do: Reshaping Marriage for Skeptics, Realists and Rebels*, Seal Press, 2014.

14 1 Pet. 2:12.

Biblical patterns

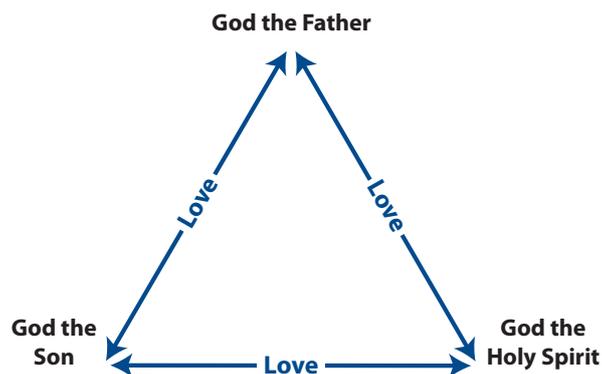
It is no accident that God's gracious gift of human marriage is revealed at the very beginning of the Bible narrative. Already, in the creation story itself, humankind is marked out as distinctively different from all that God has already created. 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness and let them rule. . . so God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.'¹⁵ Immediately they are commanded to be fruitful and multiply and their union in marriage is presented to us. 'The impersonal "let there be" (or its equivalents) of the seven preceding creative acts is replaced by the personal "let us". Only in the creation of humanity is the divine intent announced beforehand. The formula "and it was so" is replaced by a threefold blessing. In these ways the narrative places humankind closer to God than the rest of creation.'¹⁶

The idea of the image of God refers not to a specific attribute but to human totality. The same phrase is used in Genesis 5:3: 'Adam . . . had a son in his own likeness, in his own image.' The son, Seth, is human in his totality because his parents are, and therefore he too (and everyone since) is created in the image of God. Already the double agenda of fruitfulness and stewardship is being fulfilled, by both male and female. The second chapter of Genesis, far from being an alternative account of creation is in many ways a commentary on Genesis 1:26-29. The grand chronological creation overture in the first chapter is re-viewed, but now with man at the centre of the created order. Everything is seen in relation to him. But whereas all of creation is described as 'good' or 'very good', chapter 2 introduces something that is 'not good'. God says, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.'¹⁷ Human beings are made for relationships, and the foundational human relationship is between a man and a woman in marriage. Adam declares that the woman whom God brings to him is 'bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh'. In that sense, marriage is not just a union but a re-union. The text adds, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and they will become one flesh.'¹⁸

God's action in providing a partner for Adam carries several inferences. Husband and wife are complementary to each other in their different contributions to their marriage. To be the 'helper' is not a mark of inferiority, since God himself is described on numerous occasions as the 'helper' of Israel. 'The word "helper", used about God sixteen of the nineteen times it appears in the Old Testament, signifies the woman's essential contribution, not inadequacy.'¹⁹ The 'one flesh' terminology affirms the priority of the marriage relationship above all others, indicating the depth of the union, its exclusivity ('his wife' - singular) and its permanence ('be united' - a strong adhesive verb).

All this is reflective of the dynamic interrelationship of love, which later Scripture will disclose as the very nature of the Godhead, revealed in the three persons of the Trinity. There is more in this than at first meets the eye. Our culture is strong

on the idea of marriage being dependent on love, though our concept can sometimes be over-sentimentalised and at other times over-sexualised. The line between love and lust is not one that is always easy to draw. But the human love which truly reflects the image of God is a reflection of the relationships made known to us through the doctrine of the Trinity. A visual image which may help is to regard each of the three persons as one of the fixed points of an equilateral triangle. The sides of the triangle then represent the dynamic love which flows to and from the three persons in their eternal relationship. Every illustration of the Trinity will be inadequate, but this can help us to understand better why the New Testament declares that 'God is love',²⁰ not just that he loves, or is loving.



With the catastrophe of the declaration of human independence in Genesis 3, everything becomes skewed. The narrative turns, at least in part, on a reversal of roles. Eve is beguiled and deceived by the serpent's clever words, to elevate her own desires above the instructions given by God. She is no longer functioning as the helper suitable for Adam. When God curses the ground, which Adam must now cultivate, through painful toil, outside the garden, it is because he is no longer the obedient servant of Yahweh.²¹ He has allowed his wife to lead him. His rebellion is consciously defiant but when confronted by God, he is as ready to blame his wife as she is to blame the serpent. However, the consequences of this first disobedience have devastating effects in marriage.

From now on, there is a struggle for dominance. 'Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you.'²² Waltke's comment is illuminating. 'The chiasmic structure of the phrase pairs the terms "desire" and "rule over", suggesting that her desire will be to dominate.' As he earlier observes, 'The woman is frustrated within her natural relationships in the home: painful labour in bearing children and insubordination toward her husband. Control has replaced freedom; coercion has replaced persuasion; division has replaced multiplication.'²³ This is a familiar dynamic in marriages still today, although its analysis of cause and consequence is widely rejected.

This does not mean, however, that we should hold back from proclaiming and defending the biblical teaching on marriage to our culture, simply because the ultimate ground of its authority is dismissed. We cannot expect to 'Christianise'

15 Gen. 1:26-27. All Bible quotations, save where otherwise stated, are from the New International Version, 1984.

16 Bruce K Waltke, *Genesis - a commentary*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2001, p.64.

17 Gen. 2:18.

18 Gen. 2:23-24.

19 Waltke, *Genesis*, p.88.

20 See 1 John 4:8, 16.

21 Gen. 3:17-19.

22 Gen. 3:16b.

23 Waltke, *Genesis*, p.94.

the marriage practices of a secular society, but part of our duty of love to our neighbour is to affirm that there is an alternative pattern revealed in the maker's handbook. The gift of marriage is divinely-provided for human flourishing, not least for family life; it is evidence of God's common grace. Like the rain, it is his provision both for the just and the unjust, so that wherever marriages approximate towards God's blueprint they are richer and stronger. This is true for both Christians and non-Christians, yet what is made available to all through God's providential ordering of his creation is immeasurably deepened and developed through the operation of his special grace, in revelation and salvation.

The consistency of biblical revelation concerning marriage, from the Garden of Eden to the wedding banquet of the Lamb in the book of Revelation, undermines the argument that it is culturally conditioned by, and imprisoned in, a primitive patriarchal framework. Far from being isolated in a 'Yahwist ghetto', Israel lived in a vibrant ancient Near-Eastern world in which patterns of cultural life and behaviour were changing and developing all around her. The unchanging nature of the divine revelation becomes even more impressive for its consistency of principle throughout the developing chronology of the Old Testament.

Old Testament foundations

Throughout the rollercoaster of Israel's history, the relationship between God and his people is frequently described in terms of marriage. Human marriage, one man and one woman united together in an exclusive, lifelong commitment to each other, is predicated on promises which carry with them a binding requirement of faithful commitment. Marriage is the earliest human example in the Bible of the structure through which God relates to his people – the covenant. So when God promises to Abram a progeny, a land and universal blessing, sealed by God's unchanging faithfulness and later, in Genesis 17, by Abraham's circumcision, he also requires the obedience of faith on which the integrity of the covenant relationship depended.

As the history of Israel unfolds, the model of marriage becomes central to God's disputations with his people, in both parts of the divided kingdom. Prophets, such as Hosea and Isaiah, call Israel back to an exclusive commitment of covenant faithfulness to God, in terms of marriage fidelity.²⁴ To turn aside from Yahweh to idolatrous compromise is breaking covenant, just as the equivalent unfaithfulness could potentially destroy a human marriage. It is the character of God which determines the nature of true covenant love. Judah is the unfaithful wife who has broken relationship with her Lord. Yet here too God's covenant love prevails beyond the exile in his work of restoration. 'No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate. But you will be called Hephzibah

[delight] and your land Beulah [married]. As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will God rejoice over you.'²⁵ It is a demonstration of what covenant love should look like.

All this confirms and underlines the permanence of the marriage bond from God's perspective. So we find, at the end of the Old Testament, God warning the faithless priests that he will no longer accept their offerings because of the state of their marriages. 'The Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.' He continues, 'So guard yourself in your spirit and do not break faith... "I hate divorce" says the Lord God of Israel.'²⁶

New Testament fulfilment

From here it is only a short step to the New Testament, where we see Jesus affirming the sanctity of marriage over and against the prevailing rabbinic opinion that divorce was a distinct option and, according to some authorities, an easy one. This view he attributes to 'hardness of heart'. Divorce is not a privilege given to Israel as some rabbis argued. In fact, the famous exception in Matthew which establishes 'marital unfaithfulness' as a legitimate ground for divorce is the only dominical indication that divorce and remarriage can be sanctioned.²⁷ But whatever we make of the stricter parallels in Mark 10:2-12 and Luke 16:18, the commitment by Jesus to, and his celebration of, the lifelong, exclusive nature of marriage is paramount. 'What God has joined together, let not man separate.'²⁸

The apostolic letters draw out the full theological implications of the parallel between the covenant of Yahweh with his people, and that of husband and wife in marriage. Here the key statement is Paul's comment, from Genesis 2,

on the leaving of parents and cleaving to wife to become one flesh: a verse he quotes in full, adding, 'This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church.'²⁹ There is indeed profound mystery in how one plus one equals one in God's gift of marriage, how the deep union of a married couple at all levels of their humanity can develop and mature with the passage of time as they live together. But the mystery of how

marriage becomes a representation in time of the mystical union between Christ and his church is a deeper mystery still. In returning to Genesis, Paul is reminding his readers that the marriage relationship which was so distorted by humankind's rebellion actually predates Adam and Eve's sin. It is therefore wholly logical that as Christ has come to crush the serpent's head, he should undo the effects of the fall and its curses, by restoring the marriage relationship to its original purpose and fulfilment through the grace of God in the gospel.

The most detailed New Testament passage about marriage occurs in the letter to the church at Ephesus, a city whose culture centred on the immense statue and temple of the

The relationship between God and his people is frequently described in terms of marriage.

²⁴ See, for example, Hos. 1:2; 2:14-23; 11:1-4, 8-9; 14: 4-9 and Isa. 50:1; 62:4-5.

²⁵ Isa. 62:4-5.

²⁶ Mal. 2: 13-16.

²⁷ See Matt. 19:7-11.

²⁸ Mark 10:9.

²⁹ Eph. 5:31-32.



Le Paradis (detail), Marc Chagall, 1961

great goddess Artemis, whose feminine presence ruled supreme. In that context, as in ours, the apostolic teaching about marriage is profoundly countercultural. Ever since humankind determined to exist in independence from God's authority and wise instruction, given for our benefit, the contrast between living by our own set of accepted social norms and living by God's law has been stark. You would expect that to be evidenced in all the major areas of human experience, of which marriage is a prime example. But if the goal of the gospel is to begin to reverse the effects of that rupture, we should not be surprised to find passages in the New Testament which show the priorities and balances of the opening chapters of Genesis being potentially restored in Christ. The key passages for personal study are not only Ephesians 5:21-33, but also Colossians 3:15-21, Titus 2:4-5 and 1 Peter 3:1-7.

The Ephesians 5 passage, beginning at verse 21, is introduced by a general injunction to 'submit to one another out of reverence for Christ'. The following verses disclose the specifics of what that will entail, but the motivation to live that way is the foundational, personal submission of both husband and wife individually to Jesus Christ as Lord. That explains why a marriage between a Christian and a non-Christian will be difficult to sustain, since each will have a different centre of gravity, a different fundamental loyalty at the control centre of their being. Readiness to live by the divine pattern demonstrated the life-changing power of Christ and the gospel to the pagan city of Ephesus, as it still does today.

In verse 23, Paul speaks of the 'headship' of the husband.³⁰ He means that the man is the one on whose shoulders the ultimate responsibilities for the marriage and family life rest. He is the leader of the partnership before God. It is in this context that wives are exhorted to submit to their husbands, as they do to Christ. The model of Christ as Lord governs the parallel developed in verse 24 and provides the pattern for a husband's love and devotion to his wife expressed in verse 25. 'Husbands love your wives, just as Christ loved the

church and gave himself up for her.' How do we experience the lordship of Christ? How does he lead his people? It is always in love, continually working for the greatest benefit of each of us, as his disciples, because that is his nature and his work. This love is revealed supremely in the cross. 'This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.'³¹ This love provides the context and the manner by which responsible leadership in marriage is to be exercised, in a consistent determination to do everything for the loved one's greatest good. Ultimately the Lord Jesus loved his people so much that he sacrificed his very life for us: that is the pattern.

All around us, clamouring voices encourage us to claim our rights in every area of life, not least in marriage or cohabitation. What am I getting out of this? Am I being appreciated, valued, affirmed, fulfilled? If not, why should I bother to stay? But marriage is not a matter of rights so much as an opportunity for loving service of one another. The marriage service says, 'All that I have I give to you and all that I am I share with you.' A Christian husband is committed to helping his wife develop each aspect of her unique potential to the maximum, especially in spiritual matters (vv. 26-27). He is to take the initiative in spiritual leadership within the family, particularly nurturing his wife in her own life of faith and loving obedience to Christ, whose purpose is to present each member of his body to himself 'without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless'. To accomplish this, Christ nourishes and cares for his people (v. 29), setting the example for every Christian husband to seek to emulate. When a husband loves his wife so wholeheartedly and is so good a husband to her, she will not usually find submission a problem and neither will he.

Paul's emphasis is on the husband because of his responsibility to lead. The effect of the human rebellion, as it skews the divinely-given pattern, is to encourage the wife to seek to dominate and the husband either to let her, or to resist in a harsh and violent way. So many frustrated wives have taken on the role of 'wearing the trousers' because their husbands will not. Of course, every marriage is different in the detailed outworking of these God-given roles. We do not have to follow anyone's inherited

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patterns of roles and duties, nor do we need to submit to sub-cultural stereotypes. The principle is revolutionary. Marriage is not about 50/50 sharing. It is about 100 per cent commitment from both members of the partnership, produced by the principle of self-giving love. You never gain by grasping, only by giving. The greatest threat to marriage unity, harmony and longevity is self-love. Many potential problems could be nipped in the bud if only we would learn to examine our own selfishness before criticising or condemning our spouse.

The biblical marriage thread comes to its fullest development in the vision given to the apostle John in the book of Revelation, concerning the marriage supper of the

³⁰ Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary series, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

³¹ 1 John 4:10.

Lamb. At the end of time, following the fall of Babylon (symbolising human power in its implacable opposition to the creator) the way is open for the Lamb's wedding to his bride, for which the whole heavenly host is waiting in joyful anticipation. 'Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean was given her to wear.'³² But it is not until chapter 21, after the defeat of God's enemies and the condemnation of the devil himself to the lake of burning fire, that the new creation is established. In his vision, John sees the Holy City, the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. The significance of this is proclaimed in a loud voice. 'Now the dwelling of God is with man and he will live with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God.'³³ This is what marriage, in all its human weakness, prefigures and anticipates.

Putting biblical patterns into practice

There is, of course, a chasm between the Bible's doctrine and putting this theory into loving and effective practice. We include here a series of applications - mostly for couples, but also for church leaders and congregations.

The priority of relationships

It is a basic biblical principle that relationships matter more than things. However, not all relationships are equally important. A Christian worldview establishes an order of relational priorities: whether single or married, a person's relationship with God in Christ must take priority over all relationships; then, for married Christians, comes the relationship with spouse (the most intimate, profound, and long-lasting of our relationships with others) and, after that, relationships with any children they may have. Only after the establishment of these priorities should relationships in the wider family, the church family and the world around find their place.³⁴

The Christian believer, however, faces many pressures - external and internal - which can lead to neglect of relationships or a skewing of relational priorities. In much of contemporary Western culture, material comfort, career success and never-ending busyness are all status symbols. This is the 'world' around us and it is all too easy for Christians to find themselves 'squeezed into its mould',³⁵ unconsciously buying in to an unrealistic view of how many balls can possibly be kept in the air at any one time. Our self-esteem gets bound up with a relentless pounding of the treadmill and we may see (and so fear) change as a kind of failure. Busyness can mean that unresolved issues get stacked up on the shelf, until the shelf breaks and the cascading fall-out proves overwhelming. Where a husband (and often it is the husband) is over-committed to work, or to serving in the local church, this may lead to friction or distance in the marriage relationship. In turn, his wife may - understandably but often disastrously -

compensate by investing more and more emotional capital in her relationship with the children; in the end, when the last child flies the nest, the wife may leave too if the couple's relationship has simply withered away. Ordering our relational priorities, and nurturing a marriage, calls for more than better time management: fundamentally, the question is whether our heart is in the right place.



Godliness and love

For Christians, the challenges of marriage or singleness are part of the larger project of developing maturity in Christ.³⁶ While the institution of marriage is a creation ordinance and part of God's common grace for all humanity, it will take divine resources to live out a marriage which reflects the ideal of Christ's relationship with the church. Humbly walking with God, admitting failure, confessing our sins, asking for forgiveness, is a school for our relationships with one another. Growing into the likeness of Christ, and being transformed by the Spirit of God, empowers us to develop a godly character, to resist self-centredness and instead to serve one another in love.³⁷ Love takes its definition and character from the God who is love, which is why marriage services remind us that 'whoever lives in love lives in God and God in him'. Such love, demonstrated perfectly in the person and work of Jesus, is patient, kind, generous, humble, courteous, considerate, unselfish, guileless and sincere. When that is happening in our individual lives, its impact on our marriages and families will be profound.

Communication, conflict resolution and complementarity

Communication is vital in any marriage. Differences of view and opinions on all sorts of issues - finances, parenting, care for elderly parents, job choices, holidays, church commitments - will arise time and again. While the skills of communication need to be fostered and developed within marriage, and by each couple for themselves, there are a number of common barriers to good communication: failure to make time to talk (as lives get submerged in overloaded schedules), fear of intimacy (as understanding each other better inevitably entails), and patterns of response which can undermine honest communication

32 Rev. 19:7-8.

33 Rev. 21:2-3.

34 This is the normal order followed in the practical applications of the Old Testament law code and the apostolic teaching in the New Testament letters.

35 See J. B. Phillips's paraphrase of Rom. 12:2 in *Letters to Young Churches*.

36 2 Cor. 3:17-18.

37 Gal. 5:13.

(in the authors' experience anger, tears or silence, while often a spontaneous, uncontrived reaction to a situation, can develop into manipulative techniques to evade the responsibility 'to speak the truth in love' or to prevent a spouse from doing so). Good communication is vital to address areas of potential conflict, ideally at an early stage before they develop into larger and potentially destructive issues, and to handle the conflicts which do arise. Learning how to communicate well is part of growing in biblical wisdom and, for husbands, servant leadership within the family involves a particular responsibility to foster such communication. Gender differences play a role here: men and women, if not quite from Mars and Venus, tend to process issues and feelings differently and develop different styles of communication.³⁸ Indeed, gender differences in various areas can – if underestimated or ignored – lead to misunderstanding and resentment, and husbands may be slow to recognise how much their wives will appreciate regular time to talk.

The role of the local church

The local church's ministry from the pulpit, as the Bible's teaching on the gospel of grace, the love of God, the practice of holiness, gender and marriage, and practical wisdom, may lay the foundation for ongoing support of Christian marriages. However, both the informal culture and the formal programme of the local church can do much more besides. On the one hand, practical wisdom and loving support should be characteristic of every local congregation, as we encourage one another to develop better marriages. A humble, generous and supportive atmosphere in church family life can provide the context in which there is no sense of failure or shame in asking for help, as older couples can be encouraged to share their life lessons with those younger couples looking for help. On the other hand, churches – perhaps in co-operation with each other where resources are stretched – can offer marriage preparation, encourage couples to undertake 'marriage MOTs',³⁹ lay on regular workshops on marriage and parenting, and provide counselling and sounding boards for problems and challenges. Many newly-wed couples have never seen a good Christian marriage at work and so have no framework of reference, no clear pattern of priorities to establish and nowhere to turn for advice. A challenge for churches is to cultivate a pattern of church family life which supports marriages and celebrates singleness as a God-given calling for some, which upholds a Christian sexual ethic while embracing in a grace-filled way those with a life journey which has left them divorced, a single parent, or in a blended family.

It will take divine resources to live out a marriage which reflects the ideal of Christ's relationship with the church.

The next generation

The challenge of commitment

The breakdown of their parents' marriages has brought a great deal of pain to many younger people today, both within and outside our churches. Many will have been brought up in a non-Christian context with a wide variety of attitudes and lifestyles regarding sexual relationships. Their own experience may include a number of liaisons without long-term commitment, since premarital sex and cohabitation is now the established norm. Those who have become Christians in early adult life will understandably view marriage with some perplexity and apprehension. Even as Christians, the men are likely to be reluctant to commit. This is partly due to healthy self-doubt; the Bible's high view of marriage can bring with it the fear that, of all the mistakes one could make, there is no way back from this one. Partly, though, it is a reflection of their secular peer group's values and the delay or outright rejection of responsibility. As men hold back from commitment, young women may be pressured by non-Christian men attracted by the quality of their characters and open nature. For many Christian young women it is the supreme test of their faith and obedience to turn down the prospect of a non-Christian boyfriend, especially if they are in a church context where such Christian men as there are appear to be indecisive or withdrawn.

Growing up in a sex-saturated culture

The last twenty years or so have seen a rapid sexualisation of childhood and an unprecedented explosion in ready access to pornography through the internet and smartphones. Young children are informed about sexuality in a way which would have been regarded as unnecessary, even dangerous,

less than a generation ago. Teenagers and pre-teens are, increasingly, exploring a world in which pornography separates love from sex, leaving sex as the immediate gratification of one's own desires, however base. It is a world far from the intimate face-to-face, body-to-soul contact of a married couple growing to know one another, serve one another, express vulnerability before one another, and give and receive in love. The risk is that

young men, notwithstanding their Christian convictions, may enter marriage laden with pornographic baggage and may, inadvertently or perhaps intentionally, 'pornify' the marriage bed.

For all younger Christians, there is considerable pressure to push the limits and to experiment outside of the Christian sexual ethic. One danger is that, in the aftermath of doing so, whether out of shame or despair they may abandon their faith entirely. Christian parents have a responsibility actively to help their children chart their way through today's sex-saturated society: teaching and modelling the

38 See material cited in Michael and Auriel Schluter's 'Gender co-operation: some implications of God's design for society'. *Cambridge Papers*, Vol. 12, No. 2, June 2003, available at www.jubilee-centre.org.

39 Some key check-up questions which married couples can helpfully ask themselves individually and then one another: 1) Are we giving our marriage and home life quality time, or just the leftovers of the day? 2) Are we still best friends? Is our relationship with one another still the most important in our lives? Do we each know that and do we tell one another often enough, by both

words and actions? 3) Do we support one another sufficiently in our family life? This involves unity and loyalty before the children, in their discipline, development and their spiritual progress. 4) What initiatives are we taking to help one another grow in our knowledge and love of God? Are we giving each other time and space for personal Bible reading and prayer, or the opportunity to attend a study group? Where couples love God most, they find that they will love one another more and more.

beauty of Christian ideals for marriage, home and sexuality; exercising parental controls over the images and material to which their children are exposed; talking through material taught at school.⁴⁰ The impact of such an investment in parenting can cascade down the generations, enabling Christian parents to pave the way for their grandchildren to be brought up in a loving and stable Christian family environment.

Nurturing a Christian counterculture

Christian couples have an opportunity to model a different approach to our sex-saturated, commitment-phobic culture, offering an attractive vision of Christian marriage and life. We must affirm through our behaviour as well as our doctrine that sex is a good gift from God, but must be enjoyed exclusively within the loving union of one man and one woman in lifelong marriage. We need to relate fidelity in marriage to the faithfulness of God to his people and the exclusivity of our relationship with him. Most of all we need to model the joy and fulfilment of living God's way in God's world through our family lives. Our marriage must be genuine and strong if we are to offer a firm foundation for our children and later generations – an environment in which God's love is received and given, where there is discipline yet freedom.

Conclusion

Marriage is under attack in many ways, as short-term and low-responsibility alternatives progressively replace traditional relationships of long-term commitment. In such a maelstrom, Christians are likely to be taken in by wider culture's seductive messages about sex and relationship,

We need to model the joy and fulfilment of living God's way in God's world through our family lives.

compromising their stance to accommodate the many pressures that arise. And yet the Bible's message is consistent and timeless: marriage is the union of one man and one woman, permanently and exclusively, as a reflection of God's own relationship with humanity through his covenant with us. It is his common grace to all of society. Thus

these challenges also present an opportunity for us to communicate God's grace and model his ideal for marriage and family life to those who are disillusioned with the received wisdom to which our culture holds. But being that light in a dark culture requires getting our own house in order first, as couples and as churches, before we can expect others to appreciate and be attracted by the Christian vision of a relationship characterised by shared commitment and self-giving 'until death do us part'.

Further reading

Christopher Ash, *Married for God*, IVP, 2007.

Timothy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, Hodder and Stoughton, 2013.

David and Heather Jackman (guest contributors to *Cambridge Papers*), have been married for 45 years and have two children and four grandchildren. David was Minister at Above Bar Church, Southampton (1976–1991), Founder-Director of the Cornhill Training Course (1991–2004), and President of the Proclamation Trust (2004–2009).

⁴⁰ www.challies.com has some helpful material on pornography and specifically on living (and helping younger family members live) porn-free lives; see also www.romanceacademy.org.

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