

## **MARRIAGE AND ITS ISSUES**

### **Marriage: The Intentional Will of God Divorce: The Circumstantial Will of God**

*In marriage man and woman become one in the sight of God  
just as Christ becomes one with his Church.*

#### **Dietrich Bonhoeffer based on Ephesians 5:25**

Let us begin with the institution of marriage, and since we consider Scripture to be primary, let us examine the teachings of Jesus and Paul on marriage. In studying the teachings of Jesus and Paul about marriage we must recognize that both of them were single and that their views concerning marriage differ. Nevertheless, it will be helpful to try to understand what they taught about marriage.

#### **The Teachings of Jesus**

The teachings of Jesus about marriage are mostly taken from his condemnation of divorce. They can be summarized into four statements concerning the purpose and permanency of marriage.

*Marriage is not the Main Purpose of One's Life!*

There are other loyalties which are more important than marriage, and that is why Jesus teaches in Matthew 6:33: "strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness." Seeking the Kingdom of God, according to Jesus, is more important than marriage or even loyalty to our families. It is more important to seek the Kingdom of God than to have a wife, husband, or family. In fact, whoever does the Will of God is part of the family of God.<sup>1</sup> Jesus would not even let a man go home in order to wait for his father to die. Instead he told the man: "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." (Luke 9:60).<sup>2</sup> While Jesus teaches that the main aim of life is to seek the Kingdom of God, this does not mean that marriage and the family are unimportant. It only means that marriage and the family are not the main purposes of one's life.

*There is a Divine Intention in Marriage!*

The importance of marriage is emphasized by Jesus when he quotes from Genesis 2:24 in Mark 10:6-8 to establish the divine intention of marriage. Jesus sees the divine intention in marriage going back to the beginning of creation:

But from the beginning of 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 they are no longer two, but one flesh.

Thus the purpose of marriage is to unite a man and woman into one.

*Marriage is meant to be Permanent!*

If there is a divine purpose in marriage, then it follows that marriage is to be permanent. This means that divorce cannot be permitted. At least this was the original intent of God when he created men and women. (See Matthew 19:3-12 and Mark 10:9) There are some writers who teach that adultery is a legitimate excuse for divorce, but the teachings of Jesus seem to be against this. In the time of Jesus the punishment for adultery was death. If a person committed adultery, then he or she was to be stoned to

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<sup>1</sup> See Mark 3:31-35

<sup>2</sup> See also Luke 9:57-62 and Matthew 8:21-22.

death. If death was the punishment, then there was little need for a divorce; although, the death penalty for adultery was seldom used.

One was not to divorce his wife for any reason at all. If one did divorce his wife and she remarried, then she committed adultery. Anyone who married her would also commit adultery. Even the man who put away his wife committed adultery by marrying again.<sup>3</sup> It is only after the husband or wife has died, that the surviving person is allowed to remarry. The resolution to marital problems in the teachings of Jesus is not separation or divorce, but reconciliation. While both persons are still living, reconciliation is always possible. Although marriage is to be permanent in this world, there will not be any marriage in the Kingdom of God.<sup>4</sup>

Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. (Luke 20:34-35)

#### *Adultery is Condemned!*

Jesus not only condemns adultery, but even the thought of it. This is why he says:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matthew 5:27-28)

In marriage a man and woman become one, and adultery interferes with this relationship. It is because Jesus sees a divine purpose in marriage that he becomes so strict in regard to divorce. It is because the intent of marriage is the oneness of two people, that even lusting for another person becomes adultery. The divine intent of marriage is the bringing of two people into a divine oneness. No one is to separate these two people, whom God has joined together.

#### **The Teachings of Paul**

Paul admits that much of his advice is his own, and that it is not a commandment from the Lord. His teachings about marriage and the family are derived from his belief that Jesus will return soon and establish the Kingdom of God, and that in this coming Kingdom, people will not marry. Therefore, it is better not to marry. His teachings about marriage can also be summarized into four brief statements.

#### *Stay Single!*

Paul's first advice is: "To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am." (1 Corinthians 7:8) In other words, "Stay single!" Paul admits that this advice does not come from the Lord, when he says: "I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy." (1 Corinthians 7:25) His main reason for advising people to remain single is his belief in the coming Kingdom of God in which there will be no such thing as marriage. He does clarify the usefulness of the single person to the Church in 1 Corinthians 7:32-34:

I want you 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. And the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband.

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<sup>3</sup> See Matthew 5:31-32 and Matthew 19:9

<sup>4</sup> See Luke 20:27-40

*Marriage is not Sinful!*

Although Paul's advice is against marriage, he also says that marriage is not sinful. His advice is that everyone should remain as they are. If one is married, Paul advises, "Stay married." If one is single, he advises, "Remain single." If one cannot remain single, Paul says that it is not sinful to marry. Paul is simply giving advice to help people avoid everyday troubles.

But if you marry, you do not sin, and if a virgin marries, she does not sin. Yet those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that. (1 Corinthians 7:28)

The only difficulty Paul finds with marriage is the conflict between two loyalties: the Kingdom of God and the marriage partner. Who is to be served first? The answer is obviously the same as that given by Jesus. We must serve the Kingdom of God first, even above the family or one's wife or husband.

*Believers Should Not Marry Unbelievers!*

If Christians face problems of loyalty within marriage, the problem is even more acute when a believer marries an unbeliever. Paul's advice here is that believers should not marry unbelievers, mainly because they do not have the most important thing in life in common with one another.

Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness? (2 Corinthians 6:14)

However, if one finds oneself married to an unbeliever, the advice Paul gives is not to seek a divorce, but to go on living with that person. This would be the Circumstantial Will of God. One is to set an example before that person and pray for his or her conversion.

To the rest I say — I and not the Lord — that if any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. (1 Corinthians 7:12-13)

On the other hand, if the unbeliever does not want to continue in the marriage, Paul's advice is as follows: "...if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so." (1 Corinthians 7:15) The believer should not force the unbeliever to continue in a divided marriage.

*Don't Marry Again!*

Paul accepts Jesus' teaching about remarriage. If one does get a divorce, he or she is not to marry again until the former partner has died. Paul claims that this is not simply his own advice, but a commandment from the Lord.

To the married I give this command — not I but the Lord — that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife. (1 Corinthians 7:10-11)

"A wife is bound," continues Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:39, "as long as her husband lives. But if the husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, only in the Lord."

Jesus and Paul agree. Marriage is to last until death. If one seeks a divorce, one cannot marry a second time. Paul advises people not to marry; Jesus gives no advice at all. He only says that the purpose of marriage is to unite two people into one. Two persons become one and they should not be separated.

**Marriage Today**

There are generally some common teachings accepted by most churches that emerge from the teachings of Jesus and Paul. Answers to four basic questions tend to sum up these similarities and differences.

### *What is the Purpose of Marriage?*

There are two purposes in marriage. The first of these has to do with procreation (to have children), and is taken from Genesis 1:26-28:

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

The second purpose of marriage has to do with fellowship and love or becoming one body. This purpose is described in Genesis 2:18-24:

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken." Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Thus, marriage has two purposes: that of having children and that of becoming one with a partner. Marriage is the work of creation and has the divine intent behind it.

All Christian churches accept the two purposes of marriage, but different churches give them different emphases. The Roman Catholic Church emphasizes having children as of first importance, while the Protestant Churches have emphasized becoming one with a partner as the more important of the two purposes. These different emphases cause the Roman Catholic and the Protestant Churches to have different teachings on birth control. Catholics generally reject certain kinds of birth control, while Protestants usually support most means of birth control.

### *Is Gay Marriage Legitimate?*

Gay marriage is a very controversial issue. Since we went to the Old Testament for our definition of marriage, which Jesus used in answering questions about divorce, we must start there. The two clearest statements in the Old Testament that deal with homosexuality can be found in Leviticus. They are as follows:

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

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them. (Leviticus 20:13)

Those who want to affirm gay marriage usually ask why other Old Testament laws aren't taken as seriously as these two laws opposing homosexuality. The law usually quoted is Leviticus 19:19, which states: "... you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials." Why do we choose to obey one law and ignore another? After all, Leviticus 20:22 warns: "You shall keep all my statutes and all my ordinances, and observe them, so that the land to

which I bring you to settle in may not vomit you out.” Before we reject Leviticus as a source for moral laws, it’s helpful to note that when Jesus was asked to name the Great Commandment, he included in his answer Leviticus 20:18, which states: “...you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.”

To give a complete answer to why one law might be accepted while another law is rejected, we must move to the New Testament. In Acts 15 the leaders of the Church in Antioch were faced with the critical question. Do Gentiles have to obey the Jewish Law to become Christians? The first Christian Conference was held in Jerusalem to answer this question. James, the leader of the Jerusalem Church, concluded:

I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. (Acts 15:19-20)

This was not only James’ decision, but the decision of all who met in that first Christian Conference. Moved by the Holy Spirit, their final decision was,

For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.” (Acts 15:28-29)

What the above means is that Gentiles were obligated to obey the moral law, but not ritual or liturgical laws. This is why Christians can ignore laws on mixed seeds and garments of different materials, but are obligated to obey moral laws on fornication and sexuality.

While the issue of gay marriage and homosexuality never came up during Jesus’ brief ministry, Jesus did define marriage in the context of questions about divorce. None of his disciples, with the exception of the Apostle Paul, ever dealt with the issue. Homosexuality, however, was practiced among the Gentiles. That may explain why it became an issue with Paul; and yet, Paul only deals with the issue twice, once in his letter to the Corinthians and again in his letter to the Romans.

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-10)

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. (Romans 1:24-27)

Scripture does not affirm gay marriage or homosexuality. To do that one must appeal to some other source. Since tradition will not be of much help, one would have to appeal to reason, experience, or biology. Could it be that a certain percentage of persons are biologically wired to be gay? That is frequently the claim. If that is the case, gay marriage fulfills the purpose of marriage in regard to partnership and love, but not in terms of procreation. While couples don’t have to procreate, procreation is part of the definition of marriage. Without procreation, humanity would cease to exist. If a certain percentage of the population is wired to be gay, the only conclusion that can be drawn is that gay marriage at best is God’s Circumstantial Will.

### *Is Polygamy Legitimate?*

Both Jesus and Paul seem to answer this question by saying that monogamy is the divine intention, and both of them quote from Genesis 2:24. Let us look first at what Jesus says in Matthew 19:5-6:

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 they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.

Paul's teaching on the subject is very similar and the essence of it can be found in Ephesians 5:31-33:

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

The idea that two are to become one and never be separated seems to imply that monogamy is the Intentional Will of God. Because this implies marriage to one person until death, one could also interpret serial marriage, divorce, and remarriage (while one's spouse is still alive), as violations of the monogamous principle.

Polygamy is more difficult to deal with from the Scriptures than gay marriage. The same argument could be made for polygamy. A certain percentage of people are biologically wired to enter into such marriages. All of the patriarchs in the Old Testament had multiple wives, and there doesn't seem to be any law against it. In the New Testament, there is no outright rejection of polygamy. There is of course the instruction in Titus 1:6 that elders should be blameless and married only once. Since most elders would have been older, this probably means that they shouldn't marry a second time, but it could also be a rejection of polygamy. If a certain percentage of the population is wired for polygamy, I'd have to draw the same conclusion that I did for gay marriage. At best, it would be God's Circumstantial Will.

### *Is Marriage Essential?*

Does one have to get married? The obvious answer is "No," but this does not mean that marriage or celibacy is the best state. Jesus and Paul did not marry, but this does not mean that remaining single is better than getting married. In the past Roman Catholics have viewed celibacy as the higher order, but most Protestants hold celibacy and marriage as being equal. One does not have to get married, but this does not mean that one is more holy because he or she remains single. One cannot give moral value to those who remain single or to those who choose to marry. Both are ordained of God, and each person must choose which he or she desires. One is not better than the other, for it all depends upon one's particular circumstances. The purpose of all persons, whether they marry or not, is to seek first the Kingdom of God and enter into a personal relationship with God. Both marriage and celibacy take second place to citizenship in the Kingdom of God.

### **Problems Related to Marriage**

Persons who choose to marry also involve themselves in the possibility of additional problems that the single person does not face. Let us consider some of those problems.

#### *Divorce*

We have already discussed the teachings of Jesus and Paul in regard to divorce, and have discovered that both of them considered divorce to be outside the Intentional Will of God. There does remain the question as to whether the Christian should ever resort to divorce. Usually the only justifiable reason for divorce has been given as adultery, but both Jesus and Paul imply that divorce and adultery are not the Intentional Will of God.<sup>5</sup> From their teachings we also become aware of the fact that they teach that

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<sup>5</sup> See Matthew 5:31-32; 19:9; Mark 10:10-12; and Luke 16:18.

divorced persons should not remarry. Most Christian Churches have tried to make a distinction between the guilty and innocent person. The innocent person is then allowed to remarry, while the guilty person is accused of sin. Generally it is safe to say that the Roman Catholic Church has taken divorce and remarriage more seriously than the Protestant Churches; and as a result, Protestant Churches have a higher rate of divorce and remarriage than Catholic Churches. Another way of looking at the problem is to say that Catholic Churches have looked at divorce and remarriage as being outside of the Will of God and Protestant Churches have viewed divorce and remarriage in terms of the Circumstantial Will of God.

#### *Birth Control*

There are two ways of preventing the birth of children. The Roman Catholic Church accepts what has been called the natural method of birth control; while the Protestant Churches usually accept most artificial methods of birth control. The Roman Catholic Church opposes artificial methods because it understands the main purpose of marriage as procreation (to give birth to children). Birth control also means spacing children, but Catholics teach that it is God who should decide when a woman becomes pregnant and still rejects artificial means of birth control. Jesus and Paul say nothing about birth control, and so the entire question is left up to the modern Church. Since the population of the world is growing, it is probably necessary to limit the number of children being born. Protestants are willing to do this with those birth control methods that are morally responsible and scientifically safe. The third world, however, claims that the problem is *not* population growth, which requires population control through birth control methods. The problem is over-consumption on the part of the first world, which requires consumption control. This is why population control is rejected in many third world countries.

#### *Abortion*

One method of birth control that is highly controversial, and is opposed by Roman Catholics and many Protestants as well, is abortion. Many Christians accept it when the physical or mental health of the mother is threatened, in cases of rape or incest, and when the fetus appears to be abnormal.<sup>6</sup> Many who accept abortion for the above reasons might still oppose it simply to get rid of an unwanted child.

One of the important issues in abortion is whether or not it can be defined as murder. This depends upon how one defines the beginning of life, or when one might call the fetus a person. If one defines life by the heart beat, then one must say that life begins on about the twenty-fifth day of pregnancy. This is about the time the mother begins to wonder whether or not she might be pregnant.<sup>7</sup> Another way of determining the beginning of life is the presence of brain activity. The brain begins to be active by the end of the eighth week, the same time as all the essential organ formations are present. All that remains is the development and growth of the baby. Nothing really new is added after this time.<sup>8</sup>

There are those who oppose these kinds of definitions of life. They insist that the fetus is not a person until it is born (respiration) and begins the process of socialization. If respiration is discounted in favor of the cessation of brain activity as a way of defining death, then it will become questionable as to whether respiration can be used as a way of defining life at birth. It is doubtful that socialization can ever be used as a definition of life, for communication (talking) is necessary for true socialization and this does not take place until the child reaches its first year. No one is ready to say that children can be killed up to their first year of life, and so abortion remains a problem that must be dealt with during the time of pregnancy.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Clinton Gardner, "The Public Regulation of Abortion," *An Unpublished Essay*, May 3, 1973, p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Ramsey, "Feticide/Infanticide Upon Request," *Religion in Life*, 1970, p. 173.

<sup>8</sup> Ramsey, "Feticide/Infanticide Upon Request," p. 174.

<sup>9</sup> Ramsey, "Feticide/Infanticide Upon Request," p. 174.

Most liberalized abortion laws permit abortion up to twenty-four or twenty-eight weeks (the stage of viability). Medical science usually defines abortion as the expulsion of the fetus prior to the twentieth week (the stage of quickening); and anything that occurs after that would be called a premature birth. Thus if one defines life by the heart beat, the formation of the organs, or the presence of the brain, then abortion following the first month or two would be murder. This would rule out abortion, for a woman would not even know for sure that she was pregnant at this time. People holding these definitions of life might still permit abortion in cases of rape, incest, abnormality, and the threat to the mother's physical or mental health. The unfortunate thing is that the Bible does not clarify any of these problems, and so Christians will continue to disagree on abortion. The crucial definition has to do with the beginning of human existence.<sup>10</sup>

### **Conclusions**

The Kingdom of God is the Intentional Will of God. As long as one puts the Kingdom of God first, marriage or singleness can be considered to be part of the Intentional Will of God. Divorce, gay marriage, polygamy, and abortion can only fall under the Circumstantial Will of God. Since God loves all of his creation, all are invited to put the Kingdom of God first. Sometimes the only thing that's open to us is the Circumstantial Will of God.

Jesus never said that discipleship would be easy and that following the Intentional Will of God would be smooth sailing. Sometimes the Intentional Will of God is not even an option for us, and the only way forward is the Circumstantial Will of God. In such times, using our spiritual senses and exercising our spiritual disciplines become necessary as we try to comprehend our moral compass, the Light.

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<sup>10</sup> In the Appendices I have listed questions on some of these issues under the topic of Medical Ethics.



