

MARRIAGE AND ITS ABERRATIONS

*If love is the basis of a thriving marriage,
friendship is what makes it work.*

Beppie Harrison and Ronna Romney

*Grow old along with me,
the best is yet to be;
the last of life for which
the first was made.*

Robert Browning

Defining Marriage

Let's look first at marriage. Jesus defined marriage in several places. In Mark 10:6-9, he said

...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. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.

Although Jesus defined marriage in the context of rejecting divorce, he did indeed define marriage.

From Jesus' definition of marriage, we can discern at least four components of marriage. The first component is that two persons, the man and the woman, become one flesh. The second component is that these two persons make a covenant, a sacred promise, to one another. That promise begins with a feeling of love that starts the union, but it takes love as a choice to maintain the union and keep the covenant. Although Jesus does not mention children in his definition, it is clear that Jesus took his definition from the book of Genesis, where the first couple is told to be fruitful and bear children. The third component of marriage is to provide a home for children. This does not mean that every couple has to have children. It only means that providing a home for children is one of the components of marriage. The fourth component of marriage is implied in Jesus' definition, and that is the permanency of the marriage covenant. This covenant is intended to be for life.

Let's take a moment to review some of the scriptural passages from Genesis, from where Jesus took his definition of marriage. There is first the purpose of marriage found in Genesis 1:27, which states: "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." The function of marriage is then given in the very next verse: "God blessed them, and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.'" The primary function of marriage is procreation or reproduction. The form of marriage is given in Genesis 2:18, where the Lord God said, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." I would call procreation the function of marriage and partnership the form of marriage. Since form follows function, procreation is primary and partnership is secondary, but both are important. Without procreation the human race would cease to exist, and without partnership, marriage would cease to exist. In Genesis 2:24, we find the purpose of marriage summed up: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh." In defining marriage, these are the scriptures to which Jesus refers.

Jesus also insisted that the marriage covenant was to be permanent. Adultery breaks the oneness of the marriage covenant. In my experience there are at least seven things that will help to cement the oneness of the marriage covenant. Without going into detail, these seven things can be put into seven commandments of marriage.

1. Worship with one another!
2. Pray for one another!
3. Accept one another just as you are!
4. Love one another!
5. Communicate with one another!
6. Share with one another!
7. Forgive one another!

I placed the commandment to love right in the middle. Worship is the first commandment. Scripture never opposes interracial marriage, but it does oppose marriage between unbelievers. Even when couples share the same faith, they need the direction of what it really means to love one another. Love is not simply a feeling, it is a decision to act on the best interest of the other person. 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 is the best definition ever given of the meaning of love, and that includes marital love.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Living Together

Having made an attempt to define marriage, we need to look at some of the aberrations of marriage. The first aberration is commonly practiced today, that of simply living together or cohabitation. When couples live together for a certain period of time, some States consider them married. This is called a common law marriage, but is it a Christian marriage? My conclusion is that it cannot be called a Christian marriage. I would agree with C.S. Lewis' conclusion on living together.

If people do not believe in permanent marriage, it is perhaps better that they should live together unmarried than that they should make vows they do not mean to keep. It is true that by living together without marriage they will be guilty (in Christian eyes) of fornication. But one fault is not mended by adding another; unchastity is not improved by adding perjury.

Most States want to control marriage and divorce, for there are all kinds of financial issues at stake. When there are children, there is the question of custody. These quickly become legal matters. If living together is tolerated, then neither party has any legal claims, should they decide to go their separate ways, unless, of course, they make such claims on the basis of common law marriage. C.S. Lewis has made the suggestion that there should be two kinds of marriage:

There ought to be two distinct kinds of marriage: one governed by the State with rules enforced on all citizens, the other governed by the Church with rules enforced by her on her own members.

The distinction ought to be quite sharp, so that a man knows which couples are married in a Christian sense and which are not.

Lewis' suggestion might work if Christianity is the only religion, but what if a State has multiple religions? Perhaps it would be better to have standards for marriage set by the State without reference to Christian marriage. Since not everyone in any State is Christian, Christianity can hardly expect to have State marriage laws reflect Christian morals. Christians, on the other hand, have no right to violate State laws. The State also has a concern for keeping the various ships in the fleet from bumping into one another. There does need to be some kind of order. The State not only has to concern itself with secular marriage, but also with civil unions. Perhaps secular marriage and civil unions could be one and the same. This, of course, brings up another aberration of marriage, gay marriage.

Gay Marriage

Jesus did not include within his definition of marriage the possibility of marriage between two men or two women. Some would suggest that Jesus was silent on the issue of homosexuality, and that scripture,

for the most part, only mentions homosexual rape. Before looking at homosexual unions, we must first examine whether or not homosexuality can be accepted as a moral act. Those who think that it can be a moral act insist that homosexuals are born that way. It is like being born with blue or brown eyes. There is nothing immoral about having blue or brown eyes; hence, having been born as homosexuals, they cannot be accused of immoral behavior. They have been created as homosexuals and so participating in homosexual behavior cannot be considered immoral behavior. Homosexuality is in their genes, and they cannot help themselves. That's the way they were created.

Whether some people are homosexuals by creation or by choice is difficult to prove, and so scholars disagree on the subject. I don't think it's a question of creation or choice. To illustrate what I mean, I'd like to turn first to a scientist and then to a person of faith. The scientist is Francis Collins, who draws the conclusion that although homosexuality is not predetermined, it is a predisposition. He draws this conclusion from a study of twins. Let me quote Collins in full:

Evidence from twin studies does in fact support the conclusion that heritable factors play a role in male homosexuality. However, the likelihood that the identical twin will also be gay is about 20 percent (compared with 2-4 percent of males in the general population), indicating that sexual orientation is genetically influenced but not hardwired by DNA, and that whatever genes are involved represent predispositions, not predeterminations.

Alcoholics have a predisposition to addiction to alcohol, but their addiction can be controlled. No one would say that they should feed their addiction just because they have a predisposition to it. The predisposition to alcohol addiction is no more a sin than the predisposition to homosexuality. We all have predispositions to something, and we have to make moral choices. Support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous offer help in making choices, and Christian support groups offer help in making moral choices. It may seem easier to give in to your predispositions, but that's what civilization is all about. We rise above our predispositions and our addictions to live in a civilized and moral world. We help one another to stay afloat and join the other ships in the fleet to move towards the common port.

Let us now turn to a person of faith. I'm reluctant to call C.S. Lewis a theologian, since he does not consider himself to be one. Yet, he was a person of faith, and he did write about theology and ethics. He also had something to say about homosexuality and choice.

When a man makes a moral choice two things are involved. One is the act of choosing. The other is the various feelings, impulses and so on which his psychological outfit presents him with, and which are the raw material of his choice. Now this raw material may be of two kinds. Either it may be what we would call normal: it may consist of the sort of feelings that are common to all men. Or else it may consist of quite unnatural feelings due to things that have gone wrong in his subconscious. ... The desire of a man for a woman would be of the first kind: the perverted desire of a man for a man would be of the second. Now what psychoanalysis under-takes to do is to remove the abnormal feelings, that is, to give the man better raw material for his acts of choice: morality is concerned with acts of choice themselves.

On the basis of Francis Collins and C.S. Lewis, I would conclude that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. I am reluctant to call it a sin. It is certainly not the worst sin. I prefer to call it an aberration. I agree that homosexuals have a predisposition to homosexuality, but they can also make choices, difficult as they might be. As far as marriage is concerned, it should be between a man and a woman. That is certainly true for Christian marriage. If the state wants to provide civil unions or secular marriage for homosexuals, I have no objection. Christian marriage, however, is another matter. It is defined as a permanent covenant between a man and a woman.

Chastity before Marriage

Another aberration is premarital sex. There must be a predisposition to premarital sex since it is so commonly practiced. C.S. Lewis suggests that chastity is the most unpopular of the Christian virtues.

Chastity is the most unpopular of the Christian virtues. There is no getting away from it: the old Christian rule is, "Either marriage, with complete faithfulness to your partner, or else total abstinence." Now this is so difficult and so contrary to our instincts, that obviously either Christianity is wrong or our sexual instinct, as it now is, has gone wrong. One or the other. Of course, being a Christian, I think it is the instinct which has gone wrong. But I have other reasons for thinking so. The biological purpose of sex is children, just as the biological purpose of eating is to repair the body. ... Contraceptives have made sexual indulgence far less costly within marriage and far safer outside than ever before, and public opinion is less hostile to illicit unions and even to perversion than it has been since Pagan times.

Fornication refers to sexual relations before marriage and adultery refers to sexual relations outside of marriage. Within Christianity both are considered immoral acts, no matter how strong the instinct is. C.S. Lewis puts the whole thing in perspective:

...the centre of Christian morality is not here. If anyone thinks that Christians regard unchastity as the supreme vice, he is quite wrong. The sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins. All the worst pleasures are purely spiritual.... For there are two things inside me, competing with the human self which I must try to become. They are the Animal self, and the Diabolical self. The Diabolical self is the worse of the two. That is why a cold, self-righteous prig who goes regularly to church may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute. But, of course, it is better to be neither.

The sexual sins, if that's what we want to call them, are not the worst sins. The great sin is spiritual pride or arrogance. I prefer not to call homosexuality, unchastity or adultery sins. They are aberrations or symptoms of sin, which infects us all. The real sin lies in arrogance, and spiritual arrogance is the worst of all. It's diabolical.