

INTENTIONAL MARRIAGE

When is a Marriage Christian?

INTRODUCTION

When I was Appointed as the Pastor of the Blairsville Circuit in the Mountains of North Georgia, I found myself in a very difficult position. Shady Grove Methodist Church, one of the three churches in the Circuit, was located close to the Court House. That was my difficulty. The border into North Carolina was about ten miles away, and the State of North Carolina required a three day waiting period before a couple could be married. The State of Georgia had no waiting period at all. Young couples, who did not want to wait, found their way to the front door of the parsonage, and I became known as *Marrying Sam*. That was not a nickname that I cherished. I just married one couple after another, knowing that many of them did not understand the seriousness of the promises that they were making. They were promising to stay with one another until death separated them.

Many of them were not members of any Church, and they knew little of what it meant for two persons to become one, under God, until death separated them. If the marriage didn't prove to be satisfactory, there was always divorce. They knew nothing of Jesus' teaching against divorce. Jesus called for marriage according to the intentional will of God, where a man and a woman would bind themselves together in a oneness that could only be separated by death. In marriage, according to the intentional will of God, every man and woman is to become one in the sight of God, as Christ becomes one with his Church. That is marriage according to the intentional will of God.

Not all marriages are perfect. Many marriages fail. Some suggest that nearly half the marriages in the United States end in failure. My experience as a pastor indicates that hardly anyone listens to the teachings of Jesus and Paul. We consider marrying only a believer, or not marrying again until our former spouse has died, outdated advice from the distant past, even if it is contained in what we call the Scriptures. We really are not interested in aiming at the intentional will of God. We want the excuses that allow us to do what we want and still call it marriage. Jesus never talks about a man marrying a man or a woman marrying a woman, He talks about a man and a woman becoming one under God. just like Christ becomes one with his Church. Christ is the Groom and the Church is the Bride.

If we were to do what Jesus teaches, the Bride and Groom would become one and that oneness would last until they are parted by death. If trouble occurs, divorce would not even be considered. If a separation occurred, the couple would seek to be reconciled. If they could not reconcile, they would remain single and celibate until one of them died. This would free the other one to marry. The original marriage could be dissolved at that time, because there is no marriage in Heaven. On earth this kind of marriage follows God's Intentional will. It follows closely the teachings of Jesus and the will of God. Any marriage not following this pattern can at best be called a marriage according to the circumstantial will of God. So what is circumstantial marriage? Circumstantial marriage is marriage that does not follow this pattern taught by Jesus. Here are a few examples of circumstantial marriage: marrying an unbeliever, marrying a superficial believer, marrying a divorced person, marrying a gay person etc. One might say that we all prefer circumstantial marriages to those governed by the intentional will of God. Let us now look at the issues surrounding circumstantial marriage.

INTENTIONAL MARRIAGE

*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

My purpose is to clarify the teachings of the Scriptures on marriage. Let us begin with the teachings of Jesus and Paul. It is their teachings that I want to study and understand, not my own. In studying the teachings of Jesus and Paul, we must recognize that both of them were single and that their views concerning marriage differ, but only slightly. Nevertheless, it will be helpful to try to understand what they taught about marriage, for their words are part of what we call Scripture.

Both Jesus and Paul define God's divine intention in marriage, and they leave no room for divorce. What do we do if we cannot achieve God's intention in marriage? Leslie Weatherhead had the same problem with war. If war is not the will of God, then how do we respond to threats like Hitler and German aggression in World War II? Weatherhead's answer was to follow God's circumstantial will, which is to fight off the invasion and restore peace as soon as possible.¹ This is God's circumstantial will. We have a similar problem in marriage. If we cannot achieve God's intentional will in marriage, we may have to be satisfied with his circumstantial will. This is not what God wants, but it may be all that we can give. When I talk about marriage in the Scriptures, I am asking, "What do Jesus and Paul teach about marriage? Paul helps by telling us when it is his opinion and when it is a command from the **LORD**. Jesus doesn't do this because he is the **LORD**. We either accept his Lordship and do our best to obey his teachings on marriage, or we reject his Lordship and create our own rules for marriage.

THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS

The teachings of Jesus about marriage are taken mostly from his criticism of divorce. Jesus' teachings can be summarized into five statements concerning the purpose and permanency of marriage.

1. Marriage is not our main purpose in life

In Matthew 6:33: Jesus said: "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Jesus came to preach about the Kingdom of God, and he considers the Kingdom of God to be more important than marriage. According to Mark 1:15, Jesus began to preach, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." Jesus considered the acceptance of the Kingdom of God to be more important than anything.

The Kingdom of God comes before the family. Whenever anyone wanted to follow Jesus, he would warn them; but then, he would also demand loyalty to the Kingdom of God, a kind of loyalty that was higher than that given to the family. One man wanted to stay with his father until he died; another man, simply wanted to say good-bye to his family. In both cases Jesus demanded that they obey the Kingdom of God first. Luke 9:57-62 illustrates the point:

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "**LORD**, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Another said, "I will follow you, **LORD**; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

¹ Leslie D. Weatherhead, *The Will of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1944).

2. There is a Divine Intention in Marriage!

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

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

3. Marriage has two Purposes

The first purpose is **procreation**. After a man and woman become one flesh, their purpose is to procreate. (Genesis 1:27-28)

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 is **partnership**. Genesis 2:18-24 describes the partner in marriage as woman. “Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.’” Procreation and partnership were intended to be part of the making of the man and the woman into one flesh. Procreation and partnership were to be held together in marriage. Who drove a wedge between them? Some blame Augustine, but Charles Mathewes suggests that we cannot blame Augustine for the split. He tried to hold them together. It seems to me that the blame lies somewhere in the Protestant movement. Why do I say this? I say this because it was within the Protestant movement that we wanted partnership to take priority over procreation.³ We were afraid that we would produce too many children.

All Christian Churches define marriage from one or both of these Biblical passages. The Roman Catholic Church emphasizes the first purpose, and most Protestants emphasize the second purpose. This is why they differ in regard to the use of birth control and abortion.

4. 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 man and woman. (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 death. If death was the punishment, then there was little need for a divorce; although, the death penalty for adultery was seldom used. Jesus discouraged its use with a woman caught in the act of adultery, but he reminded her and those ready to stone her to death: “Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.” (John 8:1-11) She could not change the past, but she could change the future. That would require her to aim at God’s intentional will.

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.⁴ It is only after the husband or wife has died, that the surviving person was allowed to remarry. The resolution to marital problems in the teachings of Jesus is not separation or

² The quote from the Hebrew Scriptures can be found in Mark 10:6-8 of the New Testament.

³ Charles Mathewes, *The City of God*, (Chantilly, Virginia: The Teaching Company, 2016), p. 121. Mathewes uses passion instead of partner.

⁴ See Matthew 5:31-32 and Matthew 19:9

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.⁵

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)

5. 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 a woman become one, and adultery interferes with this relationship. It is because Jesus sees a divine purpose in marriage that he is 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.

By spiritualizing adultery, Jesus accuses all of us of being satisfied with God’s circumstantial will, when we should be aiming at God’s intentional will.

THE TEACHINGS OF PAUL

Paul admits that much of his advice is his own, and that it is not a commandment from the LORD. If this is the case, then why should we bother with Paul’s teachings? In preparing a video on the life and teachings of Paul, Ernest Saunders’s said, “Paul never sat at the feet of the master, but he may be the only one of the Apostles who really understood him.” For this reason, Paul’s teachings on marriage must be included.⁶ After all, Paul wrote the majority of the New Testament.

We just have to keep in mind that his teachings about marriage are derived from his belief that Jesus would return soon and establish the Kingdom of God. 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.

1. Stay Single!

Paul’s first advice is to the unmarried: “I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am.” (1Corinthians 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.

2. 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,

⁵ See Luke 20:27-40

⁶ Ernest W. Saunders, *Apostle of the Nations* (Nashville: Graded Press, 1989). The quote can be found near the end of the video.

“Remain single.” If one cannot remain single, Paul says that it is not sinful to marry. Paul is simply giving advice to spare people 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 spouse.

3. Don’t marry an Unbeliever!

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 share the most important thing in life—their oneness in the flesh and their commitment to the Kingdom of God.

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.

4. Don’t marry Again!

Paul accepts Jesus’ teaching about remarriage. If one does get a divorce, he and 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 possibly be separated.

5. If Married, stay Married, if Possible!

What happens if we find ourselves in a marriage with someone who does not share our faith? Paul’s answer is clear. Stay in the marriage as long as your partner gives you the freedom to express and exercise your faith, but if your faith begins to bother your partner and he or she wants out of the marriage, divorce is always an option.

Is remarriage an option? Paul says, “NO,” but then Paul expected the the end of history at any moment.. If one does choose to marry, a shared faith had better become the central focus the second time around, Christian faith cannot baptize the Hollywood approach to sex and marriage. (1 Corinthians 7:15-16)

ALTERNATIVE MARRIAGE

Polygamy

Both Jesus and Paul seem to answer this question by saying that *monogamy* is God's 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, not polygamy, is the intentional will of God. Polygamy can only be a circumstantial will of God. Monogamy implies marriage to one person until death. This disqualifies, serial marriage, open marriage, divorce, and remarriage, while one's spouse is still alive, as violations of the monogamous principle.

All of the patriarchs in the Old Testament had multiple wives, and there doesn't seem to be any law against it. There is a warning directed at Solomon, who had 700 wives (princesses) and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11:3). Solomon is being warned that his wives, who symbolized confusing political alliances, would turn the heart of Solomon away from God. Solomon is also warned against having too many horses (military might) and too much gold (Heavy taxation)(Deuteronomy 17:16-17).

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 be 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. I'd have to draw the conclusion that polygamy can only operate within God's circumstantial will. It cannot be the intentional will of God. What might be the application of circumstantial marriage? Suppose one is involved in polygamy before becoming a Christian. It would be God's circumstantial will that the marriage continue until death, but the marriage is not God's intentional will.

Gay Marriage

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.

Leviticus

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)

Old Testament laws have not taken as seriously today as they have been in the past. Another law, Leviticus 19:19, 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 not to obey these laws? 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 is helpful to note that when Jesus was asked to name the Greatest Commandment in Scripture, he included in his answer Leviticus 20:18, which states: "...you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the **LORD.**"

Acts 15

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 a decision made by James, but it was a decision made by 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.” (Acts 15:28-29)

What the above means is that Gentiles were obligated to obey the moral laws, but not the 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 adultery.

Corinth and Rome

While the issues of homosexuality and gay marriage 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 homosexuality or gay marriage. To do that one must appeal to some other source. Since tradition will not be of much help, one would have to appeal to experience or biology. Could it be that a certain percentage of persons are biologically wired to be gay? That is frequently the claim.

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. We must examine whether or not homosexuality can be viewed as a moral act. Those who think that it can be viewed as 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:

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.⁷

Alcoholics have a predisposition, or an 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.

If that is the case, gay marriage fulfills the purpose of marriage in regard to partnership, 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, like polygamy, and divorce, can only be God's circumstantial will. The same would be true of traditional couples, who cannot or will not follow the stringent rules for marriage laid out by Jesus and Paul. Christian principles are admittedly strict, but then God offers help.

MARITAL ISSUES

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.

1. 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 all 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.⁸

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:

⁷ Francis Collins, *The Language of God*, Kindle Edition.

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Toronto: Simon and Schuster, 1952), p. 90.

...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.⁹

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. What about homosexuality? Is it a sin? For me, homosexuality would be wrong, but there are many kinds of wrong. It is wrong to make the marital promise to be faithful until death, and not to mean it. That would make any marriage circumstantial. According to Scripture it is wrong to divorce and marry again, except to reconcile and marry again your original wife or husband.

2. Living Together

Having made an attempt to define marriage, we need to look at some of the problems related to marriage. The first problem 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 to be 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.¹⁰

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 claim, 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 its laws 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 [one] knows which couples are married in a Christian sense and which are not.¹¹ Church weddings should only be for Christians, and perhaps Christians should be married on Sunday morning in front of their faith-family.

Lewis has the right idea when he suggests setting up two kinds of marriage services, secular and Christian. Christians, or other people of faith, would have to abide by both sets of laws, but secularists would only have to abide by the secular laws. 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 order. The State not only has to concern itself with secular marriage laws, but also with religious covenants. This, of course, brings up another problem for Christians—divorce,

3. 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 of 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

⁹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Toronto: Simon and Schuster:, 1952), p, 95.

¹⁰ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Toronto: Simon and Schuster:, 1952), p. 98.

¹¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Toronto: Simon and Schuster:, 1952), p. 102.

given as adultery, but both Jesus and Paul insist that divorce and adultery are not the intentional will of God.¹² From their teachings we also become aware of the fact that they teach that 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 Roman Catholic Churches have looked at divorce and remarriage as being outside of the intentional will of God and Protestant Churches have viewed divorce and remarriage in terms of the circumstantial will of God. Under the present circumstances, it's the best that we can do.

4. 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. Birth control also means spacing children, but some people mistakenly believe that only God should decide who has children and when. 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, but over-consumption on the part of the first world, which needs consumption control. This is why population control is rejected in so many third world countries.

5. 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶ Abortion cannot be the

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

¹³ Clinton Gardner, "The Public Regulation of Abortion," *An Unpublished Essay*, May 3, 1973, p. 24.

¹⁴ Paul Ramsey, "Feticide/Infanticide Upon Request," *Religion in Life*, 1970, p. 173.

¹⁵ Ramsey, "Feticide/Infanticide Upon Request," p. 174.

¹⁶ Ramsey, "Feticide/Infanticide Upon Request," p. 174.

intentional will of God. When we resort to abortion for the sake of the mother's health, or because a young girl was raped, we are following God's circumstantial will, not his intentional will.

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 Scripture 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 life. When we resort to abortion we are following God's circumstantial will, not his intentional will.

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 part of the intentional will of God. Polygamy, open marriage, traditional marriage, gay marriage and even divorce, can only fall under the circumstantial will of God. Since God loves all of his creation, all are invited to receive his grace and put the Kingdom of God first. I'm afraid that all of us are following the circumstantial will of God when we should be aiming at the intentional will of God.

Jesus never said that discipleship would be easy and that following the intentional will of God would be smooth sailing. The way forward is through the circumstantial will of God. In such times, using our spiritual senses and exercising our spiritual disciplines become necessary as we try to comprehend God's intentional will for us, whether we remain single or marry. God has a divine purpose for us in his Kingdom.

Jesus 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 seal the oneness of the marriage covenant. Without going into detail, these seven things make up the seven commandments of marriage.

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 with an unbeliever. 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 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.

Below is my list of what is needed for couples to be faithful until they are separated by death.

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!

None of us in this life will ever achieve the the perfect intentional will of God. We will always be struggling through circumstances that prevent us from merging our wills completely into God's will.

The Big Question for Today

The big question today has to do with Gay Marriage. Can a man marry a man or can a woman marry a woman? Obviously they can, but can it be a Christian wedding? Jesus and Paul, who's teachings and writings

make up the majority of the New Testament Scriptures, place some admittedly strict teachings on marriage before us. They define marriage as a union of a man and a woman into one flesh that can never be separated, not by adultery, not by divorce, not by a second marriage. While one's spouse is alive, the goal should be reconciliation, not a second or third marriage. These are hard words indeed, and no one can keep them perfectly. "The Christian principles," said C.S. Lewis, "are admittedly stricter than the others; but then we think you will get help towards obeying them which you will not get towards obeying the others."¹⁷

Two Warnings

The Need for Forgiveness. If we can't come close to the intentional will of God, we need to recognize *why*. The tax collector knew *why*. He knew that what he was doing was wrong. That's why he beat his breast and cried out, "God be merciful to me a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." (Luke 18:13-14)

*When a man is getting worse,
he understands his badness less and less.
A moderately bad man knows he is not very good.
a thoroughly bad man thinks he is all right.
Good people know about both good and evil:
bad people do not know either.¹⁸*

The Need for Humility. If you can come close to the intentional will of God, give thanks to God and try to understand why others are struggling. Don't imitate the Pharisee by saying, "I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." (Luke 8:11-13)

I can't speak for anyone else. I can only speak for myself. The Scriptures have convinced me that marriage should be defined as a man and a woman making a covenant to be faithful to one another until death separates them. It would also be wrong for me to marry another man. I can't speak for anyone else. When I joined the Church I made a covenant to love everyone, good or bad. I agree with C.S. Lewis who said: "I must hate the bad man's actions, but not hate the bad man; or, as they would say, "hate the sin but not the sinner."¹⁹ I would change it slightly, saying, "Hate the sin and love the sinner." As God calls his prodigal sons and daughters to come home, he also calls every one of us.

None of us in this life will ever achieve the the perfect intentional will of God. We will always be struggling through circumstances that prevent us from merging our wills completely into God's will, but Jesus teaches us in the **LORD's** prayer, to pray for God's will to be done on earth as in heaven. This must be our goal.

*Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done,
on Earth as it is Heaven.
Matthew 6:10*

¹⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Toronto: Simon and Schuster:, 1952), p. 94.

¹⁸ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Toronto: Simon and Schuster:, 1952), p. 88 .

¹⁹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Toronto: Simon and Schuster:, 1952), p. 105.

TRADITIONAL VOWS

I take you...
to love and to hold
from this day forward,
for better or for worse,
for richer or poorer,
in sickness and in health,
to love and to cherish
until death do us part.
This is my solemn vow.

United Methodist Church