

BASIC BIBLE PRINCIPLES

MARRIAGE—“ONLY IN THE LORD”

Choosing a marriage partner is one of the most far-reaching decisions in our lives, affecting most if not all of the rest of our lives. If Christ means anything to us, then we will delight to practise his commands, including those about marriage.

The institution of marriage

It began when God created male and female, and said: “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:26-28). This is expanded in Genesis 2:18-24, and the arrangement is confirmed by Christ (Mt. 19:4-6; Mk. 10:6-9). Eve, being made from the rib of Adam, was “flesh of [his] flesh”; and so, following the same pattern, their descendants become “one flesh” (Gen. 2:24) when married.

Principles derived from this are:

- They become one flesh (with resulting responsibilities)
- Marriage is permanent (Mt. 19:6; Mk. 10:9)
- It is valid without sacrament or ceremony.

Parallel with Christ and the ecclesia

Ephesians 5 parallels human marriage and the relationship between Christ and the ecclesia. Christ and the ecclesia is the primary relationship, marriage being derived from it. It is therefore a type, and Christ’s requirements must come first, otherwise the type is spoilt.

Headship and submission (vv. 22-24):

Christ has saved us and is our head. The whole ecclesia should be in submission to him. From this parallel, wives should be in submission to their husbands, as to the Lord.

- **But**, if married out of the Lord, this is not possible in the most important things.

Love of husband for wife (as himself) (vv. 25-29):

Christ gave himself for the ecclesia that it might be sanctified and perfected. So also husbands should show true love for their wives, in Divine things as well as natural.

- **But**, this role is absent if a man marries outside the ecclesia. Neither can the wife help her husband, as Eve was provided as a help suitable for Adam (Gen. 2:18).

One flesh (vv. 30-33):

Paul quotes Genesis 2, interpreting it as referring in the first place to Christ and the ecclesia. From this he develops the theme of unity between husband and wife (v. 33).

- **But**, this is neither meaningful nor feasible if one partner is not in Christ.

A direct command

1 Corinthians 7:39: “The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord”.

The phrase “only in the Lord” concerns a widow remarrying, who may only marry a fellow disciple, and establishes a general principle that the marriage of any disciple should be “only in the Lord”.

Our obligation to Christ

Christ's loving service to us obliges us to obey and serve him (2 Cor. 5:14,15). Christ comes first for the believer. His wishes take precedence over those of a marriage partner (Mt. 6:33; 10:37,38). They involve a full belief in his teaching and obedience to it. To choose a partner in marriage having different beliefs and different principles is a denial of Christ. Our example affects others, and we cannot expect others to keep the commands of Christ if we do not practise them, or if we teach an exception to one of them.

Influence of a marriage partner

2 Corinthians 6:14: "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?"

Marriage is the most intimate way in which two people are yoked together. Because the marriage bond is intended to be permanent (1 Cor. 7:10,11), separable only by death (Rom. 7:3; 1 Cor. 7:39), it normally has a lifelong influence for good or ill. If our partner's life is based on different principles, this will work against us. Husbands and wives should be working to a common goal. Scripture shows that neglect of the principle of marriage only in the Lord had dramatic effect, leading to the Flood (Gen. 6:1-7), and causing Israel's downfall under the Judges (Judg. 3:1-7).

The separation indicated in 2 Corinthians 6 cannot be practised if our partner is not in the Faith. Holiness in mind and body, both within and outside marriage, is part of the true disciple's way (Eph. 5:3-7; 1 Thess. 4:3-5,7). Our bodies are members of Christ, "one spirit" with him (1 Cor. 6:17), a greater relationship than marriage in the flesh. If we count Christ as a close friend we will choose other close friends of that same "one spirit". God hates competition from false 'gods' (anything which competes with Him for worship and attention).

What about the children?

By marrying an unbeliever we do not put just ourselves at risk. There are also effects on any children. How will they be brought up? There is spiritual conflict in the family. To put oneself in this position shows irresponsibility and lack of thought for the children. It reduces the opportunity of them being saved for eternal life. In the time of Ezra this was counted as the holy seed mingling themselves with others, and as sin against God (Ezra 9:2; cf. Neh. 13:23-29). We too through Christ share in the covenant God made with Abraham's seed, and this covenant ought not to be defiled. Malachi, when the LORD'S holiness was profaned by marriage with the unbeliever, remarks on the purpose of having children—that God "might seek a godly seed", that is children of His own (Mal. 2:11,15, note mg.). This is difficult when both parents are committed to the Truth, and much more when this is not so.

Finally

The suggestion that good may come from marrying an unbeliever, with the unbeliever being converted, will tempt some. More likely the opposite will occur. Those most strongly based in the Truth are less likely to succumb to the temptation anyway, because their spiritual interests will bring them more into companionship with those of a like mind. The weakly based put themselves at even greater risk. Once we forsake the principle of marriage only in the Lord, and justify our action, it is difficult to teach or advise others of the right way.

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