

CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES ON MARRIAGE, THE FAMILY AND DIVORCE

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Marriage

The Christian understanding of marriage comes from two beliefs:

- that human beings are created in the image of God, and
- that the character of God is expressed in relationships and in faithfulness.

In the Bible, Genesis chapter 1, verse 27 records God creating: '*man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them*'. In what ways are men and women made 'in God's image'? Christians believe in the Trinity – that God is both one person and also three persons at the same time (God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit): Each of these is in a relationship with the others, so relationships are part of the nature of God. Men and women are the also same (human) yet different (male and female) and this is one important respect in which they reflect the '*image of God*'.

When God describes his own character to Moses, one of the great leaders in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, he says that he is '*abounding in love and faithfulness* (Exodus chapter 34, verse 6). The basis of the Christian understanding of marriage is that it too is based on '*love and faithfulness*': This is shown in the formal commitment of one man to one woman, unconditionally, exclusively and for life.

So, Christian marriage reflects God in two ways: Firstly it makes two people one – together, yet different; secondly it has love and faithfulness at its heart.

As well as God being committed in love to all individuals, he is also committed to his Church – Christians as a whole throughout the world. The Bible in Ephesians chapter 5, verses 21, to 33 speaks of Christian marriage as a visible sign to the world of the reality of God's commitment to his church (all Christians). Seeing God's commitment to the couple being married is a reminder that he is committed to the whole Church – Christians everywhere. Marriage is seen as the most fulfilling model for personal relationships, both for the husband and wife themselves (see God's statement in Genesis chapter 2, verses 20 to 24, concerning God's provision of Eve as the "*suitable helper*" for Adam); it is also seen as the basis for stable family life and indeed stability in wider society.

Christians therefore see marriage as a covenant or agreement between:

- the couple being married;
- the couple and God; and
- the couple and society.

Christian marriage begins in the context of a service or act of worship, usually in a church. This is so that:

- the couple can celebrate with family, friends and the community the commitment that is being made, and
- they can all seek God's help through prayer, as the couple make their marriage vows to one another.

Marriage is therefore understood as being first and foremost an act carried out before God and under his blessing. To be considered legally married, it is necessary for the ceremony to include aspects which fulfil the laws of the State about marriage. Whilst this is important and necessary for Christians, the secular law is regarded by them as secondary to the law of God,

and even where the minister performing the wedding is also serving as State Registrar, the ceremony is seen first and foremost as an act of worship, and not chiefly as a legal event.

The Introduction to the authorised wedding service of the Church of England starts with the understanding that the congregation are gathering in the presence of God as they ask his blessing on the couple coming for marriage. It continues:

'The Bible teaches us that marriage is a gift of God in creation and a means of his grace, a holy mystery in which man and woman become one flesh. It is God's purpose that, as husband and wife give themselves to each other in love throughout their lives, they shall be united in that love as Christ is united with his Church.'

'Marriage is given, that husband and wife may comfort and help each other, living faithfully together in need and in plenty, in sorrow and in joy. It is given, that with delight and tenderness they may know each other in love, and, through the joy of their bodily union, may strengthen the union of their hearts and lives. It is given as the foundation of family life in which children may be born and nurtured in accordance with God's will, to his praise and glory.'

'In marriage husband and wife belong to one another, and they begin a new life together in the community. It is a way of life that all should honour; and it must not be undertaken carelessly, lightly, or selfishly, but reverently, responsibly, and after serious thought.'

Partnership and Commitment

The two key words for the Christian understanding of marriage are 'Partnership' and 'Commitment'. As a married couple, husband and wife form a unit before God, before each other and before the world: this is a partnership of equals who come with all their differences and individuality to complement and fulfil one another. This partnership is marked by commitment, as it is entered into with the intention that it be faithful and exclusive for life. Although this is a prospect that can rightly sound daunting, it gives a great sense of security, as both people enter into marriage knowing their partner's love, and prepared to commit themselves to their partner in this total and unconditional way. This complete and unconditional commitment is seen in the marriage service when the couple promise, in the well-known words, that their marriage will be *'for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health...'*

'Reverently' and 'responsibly'

The Christian understanding of marriage fully acknowledges that, sadly, relationships do break down and divorce occurs, but it is key to this understanding that a marriage must not be undertaken on the basis that if things become difficult, divorce will be an option. To say 'I'll get married and, if things go wrong, I can always get divorced' is an unacceptable attitude to Christians. Christian marriage is entered into on the clear intention that, although in any relationship things will go wrong, this commitment is intended to be for life and is being started with the firm intention that the door will be closed on the option of divorce. Because of this, the Introduction to the Anglican Marriage Service concludes that *'it must not be undertaken carelessly, lightly, or selfishly, but reverently, responsibly, and after serious thought'*.

This commitment, however, is not only shared by the husband and wife, but God is also committed to the marriage, and, as part of the service, prayers are said to ask for his support and to speak his blessing over the couple as they start their married life together. This is why

Christians talk about ‘the sanctity of marriage’, meaning that they regard it as holy or dedicated to God and of great importance - to God, to society, as well as to the couple involved.

Divorce

As said above, whilst the Christian view is clear about the nature and holiness of marriage, there is far less agreement amongst Christians when it comes to the issue of divorce. The traditional view was that as marriage is a covenant or agreement entered into before God and sealed by him, then it was beyond the ability of mere people to bring to an end what God had created. Hence the theological and legal manoeuvrings and debates on the part of both Church and State at the time of Henry VIII, when the King wanted to end his first marriage. The Pope, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, opposed it and, as a result, the King ordered the breakaway of the Church of England from the Papacy. The Roman Catholic Church today would hold to the same view that divorce is wrong. However, it allows a marriage in certain defined circumstances to be annulled – that is, to be declared never to have validly existed in the first place.

Most Christian denominations today, however, recognise both the possibility of divorce in certain circumstances, and its necessity in cases where a marriage relationship has broken down to the point where it is destructive to the couple involved. This is always a situation of much sadness and regret – not least normally to the parties themselves. Whilst the Church needs to be careful not to stand in judgment or to make a painful situation worse, it is right to acknowledge that human sin and selfishness sometimes lead to a marriage relationship being a damaging thing and the ending of that marriage being the ‘least bad’ option available.

Re-marriage after divorce

There are further differences in Christian beliefs as to the possibility of re-marriage after a divorce has occurred. In practice, Anglican clergy, as their own conscience leads them, may choose whether or not, and in what circumstances, to remarry divorcees. In many of the free-church denominations (Baptist, Methodist etc), the position is more relaxed, with a formal permission being given by the national church for their ministers to conduct the remarriage of divorcees.

In this, all churches are agreed as to the need to protect the holiness and unique status of marriage, whilst at the same time recognising the reality of broken relationships and the fresh start which the Gospel offers. For many Christians, this is a question of pastoral sensitivity and the acknowledgement of needing to face the choice of which would be preferable: to conduct the re-marriage of a divorcee, or see a relationship which is not prayed over and marked before God. – In some denominations, instead of re-marriage, there is the offer of a blessing instead, but this is now increasingly disused, largely due to concern at how it can be right to bless something in the name of God that it is thought God does not in itself permit.

However, all churches are keen to uphold the unique status and value of marriage, and thus where remarriage of divorcees is permitted, great care is taken to avoid situations of in effect blessing adultery. A higher degree of pastoral preparation is normally required before the second marriage, and the request for a remarriage in church is likely to be declined if the new relationship was a factor in the breakdown in the previous marriage.

Jesus’ views on marriage and divorce

The Bible does not record Jesus commenting very much on marriage itself, other than in the context of considering the issue of divorce and the possibility of re-marriage after divorce.

From Mark chapter 10, verses 2 to 12, it is clear that Jesus regarded a marriage as an act created by God, and therefore something which human beings should not destroy: “...*what God has joined together, let no-one separate*” (Mark chapter 10, verse 9). Jesus goes on to say that if divorce occurs and a person re-marries, then that is the equivalent of committing an act of adultery. However, in Matthew’s account of the same teaching, he records Jesus as adding an exception, whereby if the divorce was because of the other partner’s unfaithfulness, then the divorcing party is not guilty of adultery in the event of a later second marriage (Matthew chapter 19, verse 32). – From this it is clear that Jesus’ main concern is with the question of faithfulness, and of our calling to be faithful to the vows and commitments made in marriage. Hence his criticism of both adultery within marriage and divorce ending marriage, as both are examples of the breaking of the marriage bond, and hence a denial of faithfulness on the part of the people concerned. It is this concern for faithfulness, and for the protection of marriages that leads today’s churches to hold different views as to the issue of re-marriage after divorce: All are seeking to reflect Jesus’ view of the supreme value of a marriage, whilst also following his example in recognising the reality of divorce through the presence of sin in our world (Mark chapter 10, verses 2 to 12), and the need to respond pastorally and lovingly to the individuals involved in such a situation, as Jesus himself would.

Same-sex ‘marriage’

With the passing of the Civil Partnership Act, there is in England for the first time legal recognition of same-sex partnerships, with the provision of a ceremony and promises before state registrars. Christians who are supportive of civil partnerships nevertheless feel it necessary to stress that, in some essential ways, such partnerships are not, and never could be, equal to marriage. They would not use the term ‘same-sex marriage’ to denote such ceremonies. The main reasons are that

- ‘marriage’ is a concept created by God/by the Church
- at the core of the Christian understanding of marriage is the way that a person finds their completion in someone who is different to themselves – a husband in his wife, and a wife in her husband. This is used in the Bible as a picture for the way that our ultimate fulfilment is found not in ourselves, but in God. In a same-sex partnership, a person finds their fulfilment in someone who is the same as themselves, and thus such a relationship is unable to point in the same way to our fulfilment in God which lies at the heart of the Christian understanding of marriage.

The law recognises this, and is careful never to use the phrase ‘same-sex marriage’. However, lack of understanding of the wider nature of marriage, and careless use of language, means that there is increasing pressure towards seeing such same-sex civil partnerships as identical to marriage.