

Fundamentals, Study 25. Marriage (1 Cor 7:1-16)

by BS Poh

o Marriage is a sacred institution of God, to be valued and honoured.

1. Marriage is to be between one man and one woman. So-called “marriage” between two persons of the same sex is unlawful in God's sight.¹ It is not lawful for anyone to practise polygamy (i.e. having more than one wife or having more than one husband, at the same time). It is often argued that godly men in the Bible, like Abraham and David, had more than one wife, and they were not condemned for it. In answer to that objection, we may say three things: (i) What is recorded in the Bible need not be what God approves of in His people, e.g. the adultery and murder committed by David;² (ii) What God tolerates need not be what He will allow to continue for ever, e.g. the sin of the Amorites in Abraham's time, and the refusal of sinners today to repent;³ (iii) Christ put an end to polygamy when He discontinued the practice of divorces introduced by Moses, and reinstated monogamy (i.e. marriage between one man and one woman).⁴ (1. Eph. 5:31; Rom. 1:26-27; 2. 2 Sam 12:7-9; 3. Gen 15:16; Acts 17:30; Rom 2:4; 4. Gen 2:24; Mal 2:15; Matt 19:5-6.)

2. Marriage was given by God for three reasons: (i) in order that husband and wife may find help and comfort in each other;⁵ (ii) in order that children may be born legitimately to populate the world;⁶ and (iii) in order to prevent sexual immorality.⁷ A marriage remains wholesome even when the couple is unable to have children. We should attempt to have more children, instead of limiting the number for our own selfish reasons.⁸ The exact number of children to have is up to each couple to decide. Sex within marriage may be enjoyed for its own sake (i.e. not necessarily with the view of having children). Contraception (i.e. methods of preventing pregnancy) of the lawful kind may be practised, e.g. the kind that does not destroy the fertilised eggs in the womb.⁹ A married person must not withhold sex from his or her spouse (i.e. marriage partner), except by mutual consent, for a time.¹⁰ (5. Gen 2:18; 6. Gen 1:28; 7. 1 Cor 7:2, 9; 8. Gen 1:28; 9. Luke 1:41, 44; 10. 1 Cor 7:5)

3. All sorts of people - regardless of their status, ethnic background, or job - may marry if they are: (i) rational (i.e. able to think for themselves) and, (ii) able to give their consent.¹¹ However, it is the duty of Christians to marry only those who are true Christians.¹² Also, they may marry only those who are not too closely related, by blood or marriage (known as “consanguinity” and “affinity”, respectively). The Bible forbids marriage between brothers and sisters, between uncles and nieces, between grandparents and grandchildren, and “in-laws” of the same degrees of closeness. Only relationships from first-cousins and beyond are permitted.¹³ The apparent problem is sometimes raised that the children of Adam must have intermarried between themselves. But what God allowed for a time were not meant to be practised forever. The Old Testament system of animal sacrifices, for example, was discontinued with the coming of Christ. Seeking God's will for a life-partner should include the factor of compatibility - in spiritual aspiration, age difference, education, etc.¹⁴ (11. Heb 13:4; 1 Tim. 4:3; 12. 1 Cor. 7:39; 13. Lev 18:6-18; Mark 6:18; 1 Cor 5:1; 14. 1 Cor 10:31; Amos 3:3)

4. Divorce is permitted only if the marriage covenant is irreparably broken by a marriage partner, say, by committing sexual immorality (of any kind) and refuses to repent of it,¹⁵ by desertion (i.e. leaving the family without care),¹⁶ by persistent battery (physical attack) upon the spouse,¹⁷ by persistently withholding the body from the spouse,¹⁸ or by the unconverted partner insisting to end the marriage after his or her spouse is converted.¹⁹ Otherwise, marriage is for life.²⁰ (15. Matt 5:32; 19:9; 16. Eph 5:25-27; 17. Eph 5:28-29; 18. 1 Cor. 7:4-5; 19. 1 Cor 15:15; 20. 1 Cor 7:39; Rom. 7:2.)

= Is your marriage a reflection of the relationship between Christ and His church?

Review Questions

1. What sort of marriage was intended by God from the beginning?
2. State the first reason why marriage was given by God.
3. State the second reason why marriage was instituted by God.
4. State the third reason why marriage was instituted by God.
5. All sorts of people may marry provided what conditions are observed?
6. Who may a Christian marry?
7. What other condition must be observed by a person who wishes to marry?
8. State the condition under which divorce is allowed.
9. Give some examples when this condition occurs.
10. Apart from this condition, for how long is marriage to last?

Assignment/Discussion

We hold to “the Westminster view” on divorce and remarriage. This was generally the view of the Puritans. (See Westminster Confession 22:4-5; John Owen, Vol. 16: 240-254.) Some churches hold to absolutely “no divorce and no remarriage”. Discuss the pain and injustice done to the victims under this view.

Memory Passage (Heb 13:4)

4 Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge.

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