

The Sanctity of Marriage

"To be married and to understand married life are two very different matters."¹ Even the believer may have misconceptions about the meaning, purpose, or sanctity of married life. Such understandings may be the result of observations made during our upbringing or that which we have seen or heard as we are "in the world" even though we are "not of the world." At times we are troubled by worldly norms and understandings of reason much the same as Lot was in Sodom and Gomorrah, "For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds" (2 Pet. 2:8). For that reason we must turn unto the Holy Word of God which remains the only unchanging and unshakeable foundation upon which one can build. Before it all, human reasoning and understandings must give way. Let us examine our topic, *The Sanctity of Marriage* in the light of God's Word and with the help of His Spirit.

Why is marriage considered holy?

Marriage is considered holy mainly, because God Himself established it already there in the Garden of Eden giving it as a gift unto the first human pair. "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). Then, as well as now, the Word of God joins the couple.

Further, Jesus confirmed it in the New Testament with the following words, "Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore, God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Matt. 19:5).

The holiness of marriage is independent of the couple or officiant. It is holy solely because God has established it with His Word.

By nature that which is holy is dedicated to the service of God. Herein lie great wisdom and a solid foundation for married life. God has intended that marriage would serve Him. When understood correctly both husband and wife labor to keep it holy by living in it, according to His Word. All other aspects of married life fall into place when the marriage is dedicated unto the service of God and to help fulfill His will.

What is marriage? What is its purpose?

Simply defined marriage is "The God-appointed and legitimate union of man and woman."²

As experienced, marriage is a journey instead of a destination. It is surrounded by ever changing conditions. As such it is dynamic, not static. It cannot be characterized by a single event even though a single event marks its beginning. It is the wedding, which is easily planned and soon over that stands out, but it is the marriage that must endure day by day, continuing over time, perhaps decades, until the death of one spouse.

As such it must be worked at daily in order to maintain it in good order. If it is to be a happy and blessed union the husband and wife must be good students. Students ever willing to learn to love, honor, and support one another and at times students in the "school of God." The Christian marriage is resilient, often flourishing in the face of adversity or trial when both have learned to respect one another and to trust in and live to the glory of God.

The Christian marriage is intended to serve God and His purposes, which are broader and deeper than we may first think. The Scriptures define two explicit purposes and implies others. The first purpose recorded is that of procreation or the continuing of the generations: "And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (Gen. 1:28). The command to procreate was given to all mankind and the yield of the earth is intended to serve this purpose.

The second purpose is that of a "help mate:" "And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him" (Gen. 2:18). Herein are contained the basic needs of the individual, emotional and biological, such as the need to belong and to be loved as well as to find aid and comfort in daily life. These needs are common to all mankind. For Christian spouses "an help meet for him" has yet a deeper meaning.

Luther wrote that the ultimate purpose of marriage "is to obey God, to find aid and counsel against sin; to call upon God; to seek, love, and educate children for the glory of God; to live with one's wife in the fear of God and to bear the cross; but if there are no children, nevertheless to live with one's wife in contentment; and to avoid all lewdness with others." ³

Luther's definition recognizes the spiritual needs of the Christian couple, in general the "holding faith and a good conscience." God understood the difficulties that man would face on this earth, especially if journeying alone and therefore gave Adam someone to help him.

Believing spouses have experienced the joy of having a "help mate" whom is not only an aid for temporal life but more importantly as a companion and help in the journey of faith.

Solomon wrote, "Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up" (Eccl. 4:9-10). Many a tempted or doubting husband or wife has found the comfort of the gospel and new strength to journey when a believing spouse has preached the forgiveness of all sins in the name and blood of Jesus. Married life is not continual bliss and natural love is impure. Yet often in the midst of great and many adversities in this life Christian spouses have found the highest level of happiness possible.

As man was not created merely to exist and occupy the earth, procreation provides the vessel in which the living hope of the gospel is carried to future generations for "we have this treasure in earthen vessels" (2 Cor. 4:7). Rather man was created for heaven. From Psalm 78: 4-7 we read of the greater purpose for man and how the promise of God is passed from generation to generation "We will not hide them from their children, shewing to the generation to come the praises of the Lord, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done. For he established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children: That the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born; who should arise and declare them to their children."

Children – Heritage of the Lord

The hope and prayer of the believing couple is that God would bless their marriage with children. This He does according to His wisdom and not ours. Some receive many, others few or none at all. Unfortunately not everyone in this unbelieving world considers children as a blessing. Birth control has become the modern day means by which man can serve himself in marriage instead of God. By it he seeks to maintain a comfortable life style and answer his intellectual concerns about world population numbers and starvation. The carnal mind bristles when reminded of God's instruction unto the first human pair "And God blessed them, and God

said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth" (Gen. 1:28). It is often countered that the Scriptures are outdated when it comes to the matter of children, having been written in antiquity and for an agrarian type life. Even the believing couple can be tempted and troubled by such thoughts.

Nevertheless, the Christian understanding of children being the natural and hoped for result of marriage is based upon the Scriptures. The very familiar passage from Psalm 127 is but one of many which clearly supports this, "Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is his reward. As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate" (v. 3-5).

This understanding includes at least five elements. First, is the willingness to obey God's Word for conscience sake. Secondly, to realize children are the future of God's kingdom here on earth and therefore ambassadors of the gospel for the coming generation. Thirdly, as Luther states "God lays souls into the lap of married people, souls begotten from their own body, on which they may practice all Christian works."⁴ Fourth, it is a confession of personal belief in the work of the first person of the God-head, the Father: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth" further, "I believe that God has made me and all other creatures." Marriage is an important part of His work of creation. Lastly and more obvious, is that children are needed for the coming generation and the orderly functioning of society. Christian parents have a duty here also.

Quoting Luther yet again: "The best thing in married life, for the sake of which everything ought to be suffered and done, is the fact that God gives children and commands us to bring them up to serve Him. To do this is the noblest and most precious work on earth."⁵ From this comes the Christian belief that children are entrusted unto us as a part of God's plan of salvation.

It is only by living faith and the power of the gospel that we are able to weather the trails and temptations that arise when we put the Word into practice in our lives and receive children as God's gift. Then come the ridicule of this world and the false sermons of the enemy of the soul. Likewise flesh and blood may become tempted in the midst of many and closely born children, much work, sleepless nights, or the trial of an unbelieving child. During such low moments one would readily counsel the heavenly Father as to the correct number of "arrows"

that there should be in the "quiver". Yet the prayer of heart is, "nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matt. 26:39). Experience has shown that in the midst of such labors God has "hidden" His blessings and we are preserved as His children.

Marriage – Interdependence instead of independence

When understood in the right way marriage is considered a gift and not a burden. Understanding such, both husband and wife are willing to make sacrifices for the sake of each other or their children. It often means a change in priorities and letting go of many activities once enjoyed as part of single life. One is no longer, "one of the boys or one of the girls." Independence must give way to interdependence and mutual work. For some the transition can be rough and the home may suffer if one or both of the spouses do not understand their new role as husband or wife. Yet as understanding comes the words of the Scripture hold true: "Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh" (Matt. 19:5).

Decision-making must be done mutually. A "big picture" approach must be taken instead of only a self-serving view, to ensure that the needs of the family are met. The couple must learn to balance the demands on their time for work the rearing of children, each other, activities in the kingdom, and relaxation.

Maintaining an independent almost separate life is common in the world. Husband and wife "do their own thing." Here the believing couple has a special place of watching. Fathers have especially been warned, "Be not as a lion in thy house" (Ecclus. 4:30). The lion, king of the beasts rules by intimidation and power. His roar strikes fear into the heart of all, both man and beast. Although admired for his strength he is a poor example of a mate and a father. The lioness must do all the work and care for the offspring. He lies in the tall grass in the heat of the day, waiting for her to provide food for him. He is lazy. Fortunately we do not have the heart of lions, but hearts that are moved by "the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe." (1 Thess. 1:13)

"A man and a wife that agree together" (Ecclus. 25:1) is but one of three rare things that stand out as beautiful before God and man. Marriage requires much individual and mutual effort as well as support for each other along the way. It is a real lesson in how to compromise and build consensus. It is not intended to be a competition of individual self-will but where each would serve the other and both would serve God. The example of Christ applies in the home also

"I am among you as he that serveth." Luke 22:27 Experience often verifies that when the husband honors the wife the home is happy and the atmosphere peaceful even though external trials or adversities may be experienced.

Divorce

When one understands what marriage is and its purpose there is much forgiveness one for another "as being heirs together of the grace of life" (1 Pet. 3:7). All matters of conscience can be overcome with the gospel of the forgiveness of sins. It truly is "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth" (Rom. 1:16). The sound advice of the Scriptures that many believing couples live by is "let not the sun go down upon your wrath" (Eph. 4:26). Living faith and the power of the gospel also make it easier to face the outward or temporal adversities in life.

On the other hand divorce is the result of a hard or unforgiving heart. It can be rationalized by the mind as the "right thing" to do. In this world it is a very common and often used way of running away from problems or legally leaving one's spouse for another. It was a sign of the end of the world in Noah's time and Jesus said to expect the same before His second coming: "But as the days of Noah were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark" (Matt. 24:37–38).

The Christian understanding on divorce is likewise based on the Scripture, which does not give any permission for it; "But from the beginning of the creation God made them male and female. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife; and the twain shall be one flesh: so then they are no more twain, but one flesh. What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Mark 10:6–9).

Although few, there are some believers who are divorced as the result of an unbelieving mate who denied faith, who has sought for and been granted a divorce, or those who have received the grace of conversion and entered God's kingdom as divorced. Regardless, the Scriptures give no possibility to remarry as noted in the following, "And in the house his disciples asked him again of the same matter. And he saith unto them, Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery" (Mark 10: 10–12).

The Pharisees questioned Jesus about the Old Testament actions of Moses on the matter of divorce: "They say unto him, Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?" To this He answered: "Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so" (Matt. 19:7–8).

Hearing God's Word – The best foundation for a happy marriage

The Christian marriage is begun in the hearing of God's Word and with the admonitions of the Scripture to husbands and wives. It is likewise maintained as a happy and blessed union by continuing in the "hearing of the word of faith." "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). For that reason attending services and other activities of the kingdom of God is vital for the continued support of marriage and personal faith. It is the best foundation for life together. Life is hurried and full of choices as to how to use time but no better choice can be made than the hearing of God's Word.

The Scriptures are a source of special instructions and teachings as to what is expected of husbands and wives in this holy union.

The concepts of love, honor, respect are often repeated especially in the Epistles of Paul and Peter as Godly advice for the couple. No one has entered marriage being fully wise unto these matters rather experience proves that it is a learning process. One in which the couple finds at times that they are slow to learn but as believers willing to make "new promises" to believe and to continue. Briefly, we note the following advice of the Scriptures:

Paul advised the Ephesian women "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the savior of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing." (Eph. 5:22–24). When the meaning of subjection is wrongly understood "This portion of Scripture willingly appeals to husbands who have been driven from the way of mutual respect and understanding, to dispute who is the head of the family, the husband or the wife; who is the greatest?"⁶ The relationship of Christ to the church however is not one of conflict and in this text to "submit" or "be subject" is founded in love not in fear and means to be loyal, obedient. It also refers to the order God has intended in marriage "and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee" (Genesis 4:16)

Paul admonished the Ephesian husbands to love their wives in a special way, with the mind of Christ: "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it" (Eph. 5:25). The example of Christ stands even though no husband can claim such a perfect love for his wife.

We note "even though the instruction for the wives is exacting, the instruction shown to the husbands is even more exacting"⁷ as they are instructed to love their wives as Christ loved the church.

Peter urged husbands to recognize the difference of natures, physical and emotional, between the male and female and to give honor unto them: "Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honor unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel"⁸ (1 Pet. 3:7).

The role of fathers in the rearing of children is set forth: "And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4).

Wives are reminded of the need for respect and acceptance of her husband in his place as leader in the home. "See that she reverence her husband" (Eph. 5:33).

All of these and much more must be worked at in married life. These teachings are intended to be taken to heart and put into practice every day. The advice of experienced Christian couples unto the younger is to apply the word of God in your marriage and learn wisdom. Learn also to look beyond the momentary concerns and cares of any given day and see rather that you are part of a larger and broader work.

Understanding marriage, its purpose, responsibilities and its sanctity creates a desire to be found often in the hearing of God's Word and in the fellowship of His children. In this way the Christian couple labors to serve God and to keep the union of marriage as holy in their lives.

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*Speakers & Elders Meeting
1999 LLC Detroit Summer Services*

End Notes

1 Luther - What Luther Says pg. 885, 2765

2 Luther - What Luther Says pg. 884, 2761

3 Luther - What Luther Says pg. 884, 2761

4 What Luther Says, page 907, 2836

5 What Luther Says page 907, 2836

6 The Sanctity of Marriage and Christian Family-Life: Voitto Savela

7 The Sanctity of Marriage and Christian Family-Life: Voitto Savela

8 Likewise we need to recognize that two different natures have been united, male and female.

There are two sets of emotions, two different ways of thinking, two different ways of expressing well being or the lack of it and so forth. (A summary of ideas from What Luther Says, 2820 How Husbands Should Act and 2821 Husbands Be Reasonable and Considerate)

Discussion Questions

1. How are the following affected by a sound understanding of the sanctity and purpose of marriage?
 - Christian courtship
 - Husband and wife relationships
 - Accepting children as God's gift
 - Divorce
 - Attending services and being in the fellowship of God's children
 - The need for family or congregation discussions on marriage

2. How will understanding that marriage is intended to serve God help create a positive home atmosphere and help to set the correct priorities for time management?

3. How can we encourage our youth to do "up front" thinking about courtship/marriage?

4. How can we encourage those already married to take a "time out" to reflect on the purpose and sanctity of marriage?