

# A Theology of Marriage

*Is there such a thing as 'a theology of marriage' or is marriage a sociological phenomenon, dependant on the prevailing culture?*

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## **Marriage, theology and the pastor**

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One thing most pastors have in common is that they will officiate at weddings. Many will also be called upon to help those struggling with troubled marriages. As an experienced marriage counsellor, this author knows that what pastors and counsellors do in such circumstances will depend on what they believe about marriage. For this reason it is important that they have a clear understanding of marriage, and its place within the theology and the practice of the church.

For many people, the most pressing concerns in their lives are to do with relationships, particularly with their partner. Whatever theological position is held in this matter it will have a direct effect on how these one-to-one relationships are viewed. It will affect, for example, how couples are prepared for marriage, how wedding services are conducted, and how married couples are ministered to, whether these marriages are troubled or not. It will also affect the way related subjects, such as singleness, alternate families, same-sex partnerships, divorce and widowhood, are approached.

### **Method**

Having established the relevance and importance of the subject matter in the field of practical theology it is necessary to come to some understanding of current attitudes to marriage. These attitudes, developing over a long period of time, are the result of the interaction of various factors. These factors will be viewed in an historical framework that will enable us to draw some conclusions about current attitudes in Britain today.

This will be followed by a review of the Biblical source material relating to marriage. This material will be taken as the normative guide to the community of faith, which allows it to be both placed in its historical and literary context, and in contemporary culture. Based on an analysis of this material it will be shown that marriage has aspects that goes beyond socio-cultural considerations. This essay will conclude with some general observations and a practical example based on this tentative theology.

## Marriage, sex and divorce

Historically, marriage has been largely seen as a sociological function, concerned with regulating sex, children, property and inheritance.

The universality of marriage within different societies and cultures is attributed to the many basic social and personal functions it performs, such as procreation and provision for sexual gratification and regulation, care of children and their education and socialization, regulation of lines of descent, division of labour between the sexes, economic production and consumption, and provision for satisfaction of personal needs for affection, status, and companionship. (Barnard 2000)

Early Christian writers from Clement of Alexandria, Tertulian and Augustine saw marriage as a means of controlling sex, which was frequently regarded as belonging to the sinful nature of mankind and therefore evil (Wright 1978 p.86). The purpose of marriage, according to Aquinas, was for procreation, to curb lust and to experience a sacrament (Dever 1978 p.634). Within the church, a general mistrust of sex has often overshadowed the relationship between husband and wife. This in turn has meant that much of the ethical teaching of the church on marriage has placed an emphasis on regulating sex before, outside and after (though generally not within) marriage, and on divorce, rather than the wider aspects of relationships and intimacy.<sup>1</sup>

This emphasis of sexuality has continued until today. For example, Emil Brunner's *Love And Marriage*, published in 1937 through to Adrian Thatcher's *Marriage After Modernity*, published in 1999, have emphasised sexuality over human relationships. This is not to say that relationships have been ignored. As Thatcher (2000 p.661) says, 'A relational understanding of the human person enables sexual desire to be positively experienced and expressed.' However, Thatcher may be interpreted as making relationships a means of enhancing sexual experience rather than sexual intimacy being grounded in a loving relationship.

In an attempt to respond to changing patterns of behaviour there is no longer a consensus as to the place or indeed relevance of marriage within society, leading to a wide variety of attitudes to interpersonal relationships, sex and divorce. Many of these

alternatives have proved to be failures, or at least no more successful than that which they sought to replace. Divorce rates remain alarmingly high. Recent research (eg MORI poll, see below) suggests subsequent marriages fail at a higher rate than do first ones. It may be possible to conclude from this that without stable foundations, the whole building appears to have become unstable.

It is not suggested here that there has been no theological reflection on marriage in the past. Through the centuries the church has taken such reflections and developed a number of theologies of marriage. Roman Catholicism has a rigidly defined theology of marriage as sacrament. Lutherans hold to a theology which makes marriage a rite of the church. Eastern Orthodoxy sees marriage as sacramentally “projected” into the Kingdom of God. Together with Protestantism each has sought to come to terms with marriage and its significance. One recent writer, Jack Dominian (1991 p.6), reflecting from a Catholic viewpoint has commented:

Marriage is the central sacrament of love through which we find God. This does not mean that those who are single, separated, divorced, unloved, cannot find God, or are not in the presence of God – everyone has their way of being in the presence of God – but it does mean that for the married God is found continuously in the neighbour of spouse and in children. In the presence of that love the invisible God becomes visible.

However, this reflection must be continually revisited and built upon if it is to remain relevant.

## **Marriage and singleness**

Although outside the scope of this essay, special consideration must be given to singleness in relation to marriage. Even allowing for Roman Catholic teaching on celibacy, the church has a reputation for viewing marriage as the ‘normal’ state for most men and women, with singleness as a time of waiting for ‘the right person’ to come along. This is not the position of this essay. The New Testament sees both marriage and singleness as equally valid. Both are described by Paul as gifts (1 Corinthians 7:7) with no priority given to one over the other. As Kristin Aune (2002 pp.110f) says:

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the entry in *New Dictionary of Theology* (Leicester: IVP 1988) reads: Marriage, see Sexuality.

Because Christians have had an incorrect understanding of the gift of singleness, many see singleness not as a gift but simply as a period of waiting for a partner. Singleness has come to be something Christians seek to get rid of, rather than something they wish to rest in, as Paul advocates. This has led to a preoccupation with finding a partner, and a view that anyone who fails to find someone to marry is just that – a failure. The current imbalance in the number of single Christian men and women has further led women to panic that they will remain ‘left on the shelf’, and men either to become arrogant because they have so many women to choose from, or to withdraw from the church situation entirely because they cannot cope with the pressure placed on them. Viewing singleness simply as a period of waiting to be married is not only unbiblical, it is also unhelpful for both men and women.

Any theology of marriage must be held in tension with a similar theology of singleness.

### **Definitions of marriage**

Before proceeding any further it is necessary to define, tentatively at least, what is meant by marriage. Three definitions, one ethical, one sociological and one theological, are:

- Marriage regulates relations between the sexes in all known forms of society and governs the status and education of children within the community (Waddams 1967 p.206).
- A legally and socially sanctioned union between one or more husbands and one or more wives that accords status to their offspring and is regulated by laws, rules, customs, beliefs, and attitudes that prescribe the rights and duties of the partners (Barnard 2000).
- That lifelong and exclusive state in which a man and a woman are wholly committed to live with each other in sexual relationship under conditions normally approved and witnessed by their social group or society (Bower and Knapp 1986 vol.3 p.261).

Each of these contribute something to a general understanding of marriage, but none has any apparent theological aspect. However, these definitions may form a starting point in an attempt to arrive at a more holistic approach.

## **Attitudes to marriage**

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The history of marriage is a long, involved, subject. Through the ages its basis and interpretation has been tied to various other aspects of life, including religious and ethical beliefs, economics, children, inheritance law, health and life expectancy, the rise of the middle classes, peer pressures, the availability of contraceptives and many others. This has meant that marriage has been a more fluid arrangement than may be expected. Indeed, marriage as it is now thought of in Britain did not exist before 1753, when compulsory registration of marriages, via the church, was first legislated. Before this time it is difficult to generalise on the form and pattern of marriage, even in a relatively uniform society like Britain. Practices varied depending on time, place and social class.

In more recent times an extensive study of family life in a low-income area of London was undertaken by Michael Young and Peter Willmott (1984 and 1986). Their findings suggested that as late as the 1950s, family was centred on the economic separation of the roles of husband and wife, sometimes with both partners working but more frequently with the wife sharing domestic tasks with female relatives who lived nearby. Research repeated in the 1970s showed a change toward what Young and Willmott called the “symmetrical family”, in which the extended family no longer played such a prominent role. Now husbands and wives shared domestic tasks between them. Social activities, too, had become more household-centred. For example, in many cases men stayed home, perhaps to watch television, rather than to socialize with their male friends. Although based in London, these findings were found to be valid throughout Britain (Barnard 2000).

The work of Young and Willmott showed that marriage continued to be a dynamic rather than static institution, open to the pressures of the prevailing culture. As twentieth century wore on and society became more fragmented and diverse, so attitudes to marriage became more complex.

## Current attitudes to marriage

In multi-cultural Britain attitudes to marriage are wide and varied, but a general impression may be gained from the following three items. First, a quote from *The Times* newspaper (4 February 2000):

The chairman of Relate, Ed Straw, the [then] Home Secretary's brother and a trustee of the National Family and Parenting Institute, said that it was pointless to teach children the benefits of marriage when the ideal of married life had little in common with the real-life experiences of growing numbers of youngsters. "It was hardly surprising that so many young adults decided to stay single or to live with people of the same sex, given the awful experiences many had endured as children in a hermetically sealed nuclear family" he said.

Writing in the newsletter of the National Council for One Parent Families, Mr Straw, who is divorced, said that promoting marriage in school would turn off many pupils.

"Pupils from unmarried homes will feel socially excluded," he said, adding that lessons in the importance of matrimony would, "add to the catalogue of unrealistic subject teaching with which most schools are burdened. If you really want to promote family stability, then don't mention marriage."

Secondly, statistics on divorces in England and Wales for 2000 (ONS 2001) show that:

- There were 141,135 divorces granted in 2000, compared with 144,556 in 1999 – a fall of 2.4 per cent. This is the lowest annual number of divorces since 1979.
- The divorce rate decreased to 12.7 divorcing people per 1,000 married population in 2000 from 13.0 in 1999; this is the same rate as in 1989 and 1987 and the lowest since 1984.
- Divorce rates are highest among men and women aged between 25 and 29; in 2000 there were 27 divorces per 1,000 married men in this age group, while the corresponding rate for women was 29.
- The mean age at divorce continued to rise; it rose from 40.9 years for men and 38.4 years for women in 1999 to 41.3 and 38.8 years respectively in 2000.

- A total of 142,457 children aged under 16 were in families where the parents divorced in 2000, of whom a quarter were aged under 5.

Thirdly, a recent MORI survey showed a highly complex, sometimes self-contradictory, situation. It suggested that 61% of the adult population are either married or living as married, 22% single and 17% widowed, divorced or separated. Just under two-thirds said that marriage should be forever. Sixty nine per cent of those that had been married said that they had not lived with their partner before getting married and 39% of all said that they felt it was important for couples to live together before they got married. Of all those that had been married, 77% said that they had only been married once. For those people that had been married more than once that were not married at present, 86% said that their previous marriage had ended in divorce.

The same poll shows that just over half agreed that without wedding vows it is too easy for people to walk out of a relationship. Forty three per cent agree that it should be made more difficult for people to get divorced. Seventy one per cent disagree that marriage is dead. The three most important factors that make a successful marriage were faithfulness (79%), understanding and tolerance (77%) and mutual respect and appreciation (75%). The top three main causes of divorce in Britain were unfaithfulness (73%), violence (61%) and lack of respect for each other (54%). Of those who do not want to get married, 38% said that it was because they are happy in their current situation.<sup>2</sup>

This research, and others like it, indicate that current attitudes are not easily typified, nor are 'one-size-fits-all' answers likely to be of much use in such a diverse situation. If there is no longer a single idea as to the composition, relevance or importance of marriage then the question of any theological significance in marriage becomes extremely important. If marriage, with its attendant questions of divorce, remarriage and sex, as well as the wider issues of personal relationships, is no more than a socio-cultural phenomenon then the church is in an impossible situation. No underlying theology would be possible and every situation is thus open to interpretation, depending on an individual's preferences, not to mention expediency.

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<sup>2</sup> Based on a MORI interview of a representative sample of 1,854 adults aged 15+ across Great Britain, face-to-face, in-home between 24-27 October 1997.

## **The Biblical Basis for Marriage**

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The socio-economic background of the Bible makes the institution of marriage very different from today's understanding. Roland deVaux, in giving a full description of marriage and other family institutions in Old Testament Israel, concludes that the actual practice of marriage largely reflected that of the prevailing customs of the area and time, though modified in the light of Israel's understanding of their place as the people of God (deVaux 1973 pp.24-38). This distinctiveness is further developed in the New Testament.

Rather than list the Biblical texts that deal with marriage and comment on them *ad hoc*, a more useful approach might be to apply to Scripture within its own framework. This framework can be used to analyse many of the questions facing Christians today, including marriage, as it enables the Biblical material to be considered in the light of the four major epochs of *heilsgeschichte* – that is the Creation, the Fall, Redemption and the Consummation. This allows the text to speak for itself while at the same time acknowledging the cultural and social realities of both then and now.

### **Creation (Genesis 2:20-25)**

God's gift of marriage is part of the original plan and purpose for mankind, dating from before the Fall. Marriage cannot therefore be simply viewed as a means of curbing man's sinful appetites. Genesis tells us that God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him" (Genesis 2:18). In all of Creation, which God had declared 'good' (1:31) this one thing was 'not good'. Without man and woman in this close relationship, Creation, and God's purposes in and through it, were incomplete. The openness and intimacy of their relationship with one another is summed up in the words, 'the man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame' (2:25). This same openness and intimacy is mirrored in their relationship with God and is marred with the loss of innocence (3:8).

Verse 24 gives the closest the Bible itself comes to a definition of marriage. The triple image of leaving, cleaving and becoming has had a major impact on Christian thinking about marriage. Together they speak of a couple forming a unit, separated from other such units, involved in a process rather than an event. This basic idea would appear to be behind Jesus' words in Matthew 19:3-9. Similarly, Paul expresses the idea

of unity and mutuality in 1 Corinthians 11:11f. He goes on to specifically link the teaching of Genesis 2:24 with the relationship between Christ and the Church in Ephesians 5:31f.

### **Fall (Genesis 3:16f)**

As with all other things, the Fall is seen as altering and defacing God's purposes through marriage. An immediate result was the breakdown of the intimacy and trust between man and woman ( Genesis 3:7). What had once been a natural out-flowing of a special relationship would now need to be worked at. And like all other things, that effort could go astray. Rules and regulations were now needed to govern, protect and nurture marriage.

Paul says that part of the purpose of these laws was to act as a warden until the time of fulfilment. 'Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith' (Galatians 3:23f). It is in the light of this protection and regulation that we need to understand the law with regards to marriage (see Matthew 19:8).

Compared with other Ancient Near Eastern legal codes (*eg* the Hammurabi Code, the Ras Shamra (Ugarit) Tablet and various Egyptian codes – see Winton Thomas 1961), the Mosaic Law, which was largely concerned with divorce, its grounds and consequences, and familial relationships, was fair and enlightened. Unfortunately, as many Old Testament stories show, such laws were often abused, to the detriment of marriage in general and women in particular. However, for all its flaws and abuses, God still used marriage as a vehicle for self-revelation (see, for example, Ezekiel 16 and Hosea 1-3). One might add Song of Songs to this list, though, probably out of embarrassment at the explicit sexuality of this ancient love poem, this is one section of the Bible that has already been over theologised!

### **Redemption (Ephesians 5:21-33)**

There has long been a theological debate on the relationship between Christ and the law. For many, Jesus is to be seen as the fulfilment of the law (Matthew 5:17). Douglas Moo (1984 p.28) says, 'In his direct statements about the law Jesus upholds the continuing

validity of the entire Old Testament Scriptures, but also asserts that this validity must be understood in the light of its fulfilment.’

If Christ is the fulfilment of the Law, including marriage, then marriage also finds its fulfilment in him. In Christ, God is working to bring creation back to its original intended state (Romans 8:22ff). As Christ fulfils marriage he transforms it so that once again it reflects God and his plan for it. Jesus’ own comments in Mark 10:2-9 point in this direction. Even though mankind still lives in a broken, fallen world, and the image is still marred, through Christ it is redeemed enough so that Paul can use human marriage and sexuality as an illustration of the relationship between Christ and his people, the church. Meanwhile, the writer to the Hebrews indicates that marriage still has an ethical place in the lives of the redeemed fellowship (13:4).

### **Consummation (Luke 20:34-36)**

Speculation about the details of this final state is just that – speculation, but Jesus himself tells us that marriage will be changed at the Parousia. In speaking of the relationship between marriage and the Resurrection (Luke 20:27ff) his exact meaning is unclear. Perhaps he is referring to the Mosaic Law on which he was being questioned at the time, speaking of a re-establishment of the Creation pattern of partners in stewardship of the new creation. Possibly he may be referring to a fuller revelation of the relationship between man and woman to which the Creation model is itself just a reflection. It is however clear that in responding to the Sadducees’ question in this way, Jesus shows that the arrival of the Age to Come will mark a reorientation of human relationships.

As the context of this passage shows, this reorientation will mean a radical shift from common understanding. The Sadducees’ question, apart from its presuppositions regarding the Resurrection, makes assumptions about the basis for marriage, that is, to carry on the male line. Jesus’ answer points to the original idea behind marriage, that of companionship. Equal relationship, indicated by the use of the middle voice in verse 35 (not ‘given in marriage’ but rather ‘to allow oneself to be married’) is to be the basis of marriage, not any other consideration.

## **Towards a theology of marriage**

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Moving from consideration of the Biblical material to theological reflection on marriage from the perspective of God's nature, covenant, his purposes and revelation suggests there is a spiritual foundation to marriage. Marriage, far from being a social, cultural, economic or legal response to a set of locally occurring circumstances, is deeply theological.

### **Marriage and God's nature**

Fundamental to the Christian understanding of God's nature is the concept of relationship, expressed not only in the Trinity but also in the knowability of God and the possibility of human-divine communion. This communion, reflected in all human relationships, particularly in marriage, is used by Scripture in a unique way to illustrate something of the nature of God.

In the Old Testament God uses the husband-wife image to illustrate his own relationship with Israel. God is a compassionate, patient husband even in time of great stress and provocation. His sacrificial love for his chosen bride has no limits and is without qualification. The Old Testament declaration of faith, 'The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin' (Exodus 34:6f, see also Nehemiah 9:17 and Psalm 86:15) contains one of the highest statements on the love of God. These words are read alongside such passages as Hosea 1-3, which deals with an adulterous partner, together with 1 Corinthians 7 and Ephesians 5, which set ground-rules for Christian marriage.

### **Marriage and God's covenant**

A second link, particularly in the Old Testament, is between marriage and covenant. God's relationship with his people is often described in covenant terms, and these same terms are used of marriage. God's covenant with Israel is itself described in marriage terms, particularly in the prophets (*eg* Isaiah 54:6; 62:4; Jeremiah 3:1; Ezekiel 16:32; Hosea 1:2ff and Malachi 2:11-14). David Atkinson (1979 pp.75f) points out the correlation between marriage and God's covenant, stating a number of similarities: an initiative of love, inviting a response, and so creating a relationship; a vow of consent,

guarding the union against the fitfulness of emotion; obligations of faithfulness; the promise of blessing to those who are faithful to their covenant obligations; and sacrifice.

In establishing his covenant with Israel, God made certain promises. Foremost amongst these were the promises to both protect and provide for his people. In return they would remain faithful to God, 'forsaking all others'. Sacrificial love and inter-dependence are seen both in God's covenant relationship with his people and in marriage.

### **Marriage and God's purposes**

According to Colossian 1:15-23, God's purpose is to bring reconciliation to a broken, segregated world. God's original stated intention for marriage was that a man and a woman should be complete in one another. Marriage, it would seem, can also reflect something of God's reconciling work.

This bringing together in fellowship and inter-dependence is seen most clearly in the use of the bride image as applied to the church (2 Corinthians 11:2 and Revelation 21:2). The church-bride is elected to God's purpose but is free to make a choice. Christ in love gives himself to establish a covenant relationship with his one bride. Christ's atonement is seen as a betrothal gift. Christ's love cleanses and makes the bride worthy of him (Bower and Knapp 1986 vol.3 p.265). These actions are reflected in Paul's instructions to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:21ff. Here the basis of submissive love is found in Christ's love for his bride.

Finally, God's ultimate purpose, the re-creation of the whole cosmos, is seen in terms of a marriage celebration (*cf* Revelation 19:7), often referred to as the Consummation (see, for example Guthrie 1981 p.809 and Kümmel 1987 pp327ff), a term with strong sexual overtones.

### **Marriage and revelation**

Marriage may be seen as both the message and the medium of God's revelation. God's nature, covenant and purposes are revealed primarily through Scripture. Although they may be experienced through marriage in a way that adds to their depth, it is questionable whether without Scripture their significance would be understood. By knowing God through his self-revelation in Scripture it is possible to come to know

more of his purposes for, in and through marriage. In the words of the marriage service as set out in the Anglican *Alternative Service Book 1980*, 'The Scriptures teach us that marriage is a gift of God in creation and a means of grace.' Marriage is seen as a revealed truth, given by God, and as a means by which we may further experience God.

## **Redefining marriage**

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Theology often gives the impression of being driven by society's agenda. This is inevitable if the church is to answer questions actually being asked by society. As has been shown above, attitudes regarding marriage within society in general have become fragmented and diverse and the church has found it difficult to make a clear response. The drawback to this situation is a temptation to rationalise.

On the one hand, there are those who have failed to draw a distinction between the essentials of a Biblical view of marriage and the cultural accretions that surround modern marriages. They tend to see marriage in legalistic terms. A man who shows no love, or even respect, for his wife will be more acceptable, provided he has a marriage certificate, than a couple in a long-term, loving, stable relationship who have forgone a wedding. On the other hand, there are those who risk losing any Christian distinctiveness in their approach. For them life-style, including marriage, has been privatised and the church is seen as having no right nor wish to comment. In this case there is a risk that pragmatism and expediency become the driving forces behind their response.

In discussing a Biblical approach to marriage and the purpose of God, it was seen that a principle aim of marriage was to complete that which was incomplete. Through it he intended that men and women should experience something unique, not just about themselves but also about God and their relationship to him; in other words, God intended marriage to have a spiritual aspect. It is this spiritual dimension that is apparently missing from the above definitions. Drawing on the third of the definitions it will now be noted that each of its clauses has strong theological overtones:

- The parallels between marriage and covenant indicate that God intended marriage to be *lifelong* and *exclusive*. This raises issues regarding divorce and

faithfulness which must be considered in the light of this conclusion. The Mosaic Law, which was designed to protect women from the abuses of a harsh society, may have allowed divorce because of ‘the hardness of your hearts’ (Matthew 19:8) but it was seen as an aberration of God’s purposes by both Jesus and Paul. The church is to allow for failure, forgiveness and restoration in this as in any other area of life, but a clear standard is set.

- God’s original design was that both members of a marriage should be completed by their complimentary relationship with the other. It is particularly significant that in a society that gave a higher priority to same-sex friendships than marriage (eg David and Jonathan as opposed to David and any of his wives) the Creation story provides a woman for the man. While affirming single-sex friendships, marriage is to be between *a man and a woman*. This has wider implications than simply regulating against single-sex marriages. It touches on the basic psychology and needs of both sexes. The Creation story sees man and woman as equal but different, separate from but needing one another.
- Being *wholly committed* to one another reflects God’s commitment to his people. This refers not to the permanent and exclusive relationship mentioned above but to attitudes within marriage. Marriage is not an external relationship, similar to a business partnership. It is a commitment to one another that seeks the benefit of the other. Atkinson, quoted above, uses the word ‘sacrificial’ to define this commitment. Such an attitude will have a direct bearing on many of the situations that bring couples for marriage counselling, and will affect the way the church responds to related questions in wider society.
- The reference to *a sexual relationship* should be amended to *a loving relationship*, emphasising the place of love and intimacy in marriage, of which sexual intimacy may be a result. This distinction has an effect on the church’s approach to sexual ethics. The Bible uses the image of sexual intimacy to reflect the relationship between God and his people. If the image is to maintain its meaning then the sexual act must not be separated from the loving relationship, and the link between love and sex needs to be maintained. Dominion’s comment above draws our attention to the loving relationship to be experienced by

couples. It is sustaining, nurturing, healing love that makes it possible for each to experience God's love as well as one another's.

- The final condition is that a couple *live with each other... under conditions normally approved and witnessed by their social group or society* includes many of the issues raised by the other definitions. In particular this clause speaks of openness, reflecting God's visible commitment to his people. Again, this clause is foundational to areas other than marriage, for if the marriage relationship is public, reflecting God's openness with his people, then the people in turn are open in all their relationships.

It would appear from the above that there is a theological basis to marriage that takes it beyond sociological considerations. Bringing this theology to bear on many of the questions confronting the church today may open new ways of exploring old problems. By further developing and reflecting on this theology of marriage it will be possible to respond to John Stott's call to take a more Biblical approach to marriage (Stott 1984 pp.274-277). In particular he calls for a recognition of the relationship between marriage and reconciliation, thus placing marriage at the heart of the Christian message.

As an example, the above may be applied to those couples where one or both are previously divorced who wish a church wedding. The debate over the remarriage of divorcees continues in the church, but if the norm for Christian marriage is to be a lifelong commitment such a practice might seem to be excluded. But the permanence in marriage is not arbitrary, but is based on a reflection of God's covenant. A mark of this covenant is mercy, reconciliation and restoration. Such a view recognises that divorce is a failure of a relationship and falls short of the norm. But covenant love always leaves a way to return to relationship through repentance and forgiveness. One possible practice would be to require, as part of any remarriage service, a declaration of repentance by the divorced person made as publicly as the original marriage vows. Such a declaration is to be dealt with in a sensitive manner, but by taking such a route the importance of marriage is upheld and those hurt by past relationships are allowed to follow a path to recovery.

Scripture sees marriage as more than a socio-cultural mechanism for regulating property, inheritance, children and women. These aspects are, to one extent or another, undoubtedly present, and often reflect the attitudes of the day, but there is more. What has become apparent is that there is a thread running throughout Scripture which shows that marriage had a significance apart from and beyond the prevailing culture.

Kevin Dare

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