

The biblical basis of marriage

God's gift for the whole of society

Mike Judge



Introduction

If you go into any Christian bookstore and browse the section on marriage you will find lots of titles for engaged couples, lots of titles on how to be a better husband or a better wife, lots of titles on how to be godly parents. Virtually all the titles will be inward looking, dealing with what goes on inside a marriage. If you search the internet for sermons on marriage you will find much the same thing – hours and hours of great biblical teaching on what marriage means for the individuals involved.

Those are important issues, but they do tend to emphasise the inward-looking side of marriage, while downplaying the outward-looking aspects. We appear to have privatised, and individualised marriage – and forgotten its public role and its place in wider society. Perhaps we have been unwittingly influenced by a liberal attitude to marriage: if it works for you, great, but that does not mean it works for society at large. Perhaps we have lost confidence in marriage as a cornerstone of society, and so we retreat to the safety of talking about marriage as a personal commitment rather than a social institution with significance beyond the couple themselves.

This briefing seeks to redress the balance and introduce the greater scope of marriage presented in the Bible.

1. Marriage is foundational

Marriage is foundational in the sense that so much else depends upon it. If it is eroded or weakened, other things that rely on it are eroded or weakened. If it breaks, other things break.

How do we know – from the Bible – that marriage is foundational?

(a) It was established at the dawn of time
Genesis 2 records for us that marriage was

instituted by God from the very beginning and hard-wired into human society. It is part of the natural order of things. Fish swim in the water, beasts walk in the fields, birds fly in the air, and men and women marry.

It is built into nature, it is not something that slowly developed over time or devised by human thinking. It has been part of life since the very beginning.

(b) It was established to help fulfil the creation mandate

In Genesis, Adam and Eve were given jobs to do. They were told to fill the earth, to steward the earth's resources, to have authority over creatures and to labour in the garden. In other words, they were expected to work and be productive.

In Genesis 2:15 we read that God put man in the Garden of Eden to work it, and take care of it. Then God says (v18): "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." (The Hebrew word here translated as "suitable", literally means "like opposite him" – like him but opposite of him – a good description of the complementary characteristics of men and women).

Marriage is instituted by God so that human beings can fulfil the creation mandate. Marriage is necessary to help the human race do the jobs it is meant to do: to work, to be stewards of creation, to have children and to raise them to be productive. Marriage is foundational to all this human activity.

(c) Jesus and Paul say it is foundational

On various occasions in the New Testament our Lord Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul both refer back to Genesis 2 as the foundation of our understanding about marriage. They both say we have to start there, otherwise our thinking about marriage is going to get badly confused (Matthew 19:5; Mark 10:7; 1 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 5:31).

2. Marriage is universal

There are some things in the Bible that are only meant for Christians. Communion, for example. The Lord's Supper is not meant to be observed by everyone, it is meant to be observed only by God's people. But there are other things in the Bible that are meant for all people everywhere, throughout time. The law of murder is one of them. You do not need to be a Christian to know that murder is wrong. Some things are universal. They are part of the nature of things.

Marriage is universal. Marriage is part of the nature of things. We have already seen that marriage was instituted by God in nature at the dawn of time. Marriage is not something peculiar to Christianity. It is what theologians call a creation ordinance. Throughout history and throughout human cultures it is universal. Yes, there have been times that it has come under attack. Yes, there have been times when it has been distorted and twisted. But, generally speaking, ever since the world began men and women have been committing themselves to each other in lifelong marriages.

The universality of marriage is clearly taught in the Bible. It is given by God in his common grace to all mankind. We have already seen from Genesis 2 that God established marriage in nature for all people. And there are other parts of the Bible that talk about the universality of marriage. Jesus remarks that before the flood people were "marrying and giving in marriage" – right up to the day that Noah entered the Ark – and Jesus says it will be just the same, right up until the end of this world (Matthew 24). Jesus says that marriage is ever-present throughout human history and into the future.

It is important that we recognise that marriage is universal, because some Christians fall into the trap of thinking that marriage is just a Christian institution – and that marriage is not real unless it is a Christian marriage. But if an atheist man marries an agnostic woman, if

they commit themselves to each other for life to the exclusion of all others, then their marriage is just as biblically valid as two Christians who get married in a church. Yes, we want people to believe in God. Yes, it is a good idea for people to get married in church. And, yes, if a couple are Christian their faith brings a powerful dimension to their marriage. But, ultimately, you are just as married whether you go to church or not.

This means we should not accept the false divide between civil marriage and religious marriage. Some people have said that civil marriage is a matter for the state, and therefore religious groups should keep quiet about it. They say: 'let the government define civil marriage if it wants to, and leave religious groups to define religious marriage'. But marriage is universal, and it cannot be split along secular/religious lines. There is only one definition of marriage: a man and a woman joined together for life, to the exclusion of all others. The definition stands, whether the ceremony is religious or civil.

3. Marriage is beneficial

Marriage was given by God to be a good thing. Christian theology has traditionally identified three purposes of marriage.

- a. *The mutual help and support between husband and wife;*
- b. *The procreation of children;*
- c. *The restraint of sin.*

(See Genesis 1:28; 2:18 and 1 Corinthians 7:2, 9.)

(a) Mutual support

We have already seen that Genesis 2 carries a sense that a wife will be like her husband, but opposite to him. A husband and wife are like two sides of the same coin. The different natures of men and women complement each other. Being opposite sexes is integral to the design of marriage.

(b) Procreation

The procreation of children needs a man and a woman. There are all manner of scientific techniques that can provide a baby to a same-sex couple, but even those processes must start with an egg from a woman and sperm from a man. And when it comes to raising children, children need a mother and a father. They need a male and female role model.

(c) Restraint of sin

Strong marriages help a community to stick together. In fact, marriage creates strong networks of wider family relationships which are at the root of thriving societies. Marriage is not only about two individuals coming together, it is also about two families coming together – with all the privileges and responsibilities that brings.

But if marriages are attacked and undermined, we see the effects on our streets. We see the effects in our schools. We see the effects in the eyes of our friends and families. We see their heartbreak and the wreckage that is left behind. Nobody's relationship is perfect, but good marriages help to

tackle the selfishness and the 'me-first' attitude of the human heart. A broken marriage lets that attitude loose again. It is no coincidence that the breakdown of marriage in our society has been matched by increasing rudeness and self-centredness in our culture. And it is no surprise that study after study shows that marriage brings wonderful benefits for adults, for children and for society at large.

4. Defending marriage is about love, not hatred

So when we uphold the biblical definition of marriage in our society we do so out of love. We do so out of a genuine belief that marriage is foundational to happy lives and good communities. We therefore disagree with those who seek to redefine it. But disagreement is not hatred. People disagree with each other all the time. And in a democracy, people should be free to disagree. We defend the true definition of marriage out of love – love for God, and love for our fellow human beings in the whole of society.

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