

# Biblical Marriage

What We Believe about Marriage

*Let marriage be held in honor among all...*

Hebrews 13:4<sup>1</sup>

Marriage is a fundamental institution in almost all societies and cultures across both space and time. While there are variances and nuances to the practice of marriage, depending on one's particular time or place, the understanding of what marriage is has remained fairly consistent. However, recent discussions in western culture have begun and continue to challenge the common understanding of marriage. Clarity on what Scripture teaches regarding marriage has become necessary. This article will seek to express what we believe about the relationship known as marriage by seeking to establish a definition of marriage from Scripture.

## Beginning in the Beginning

In seeking to establish a working definition of marriage there is one verse that is foundational to our definition.

*Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.*

Gen 2:24

The reason that Gen. 2:24 is foundational to our understanding of Biblical Marriage is three-fold.

- (1) The priority of the creation accounts - The verse is rooted in God's creation of man and woman. Creation holds a significant weight in Scripture because in the creation account we see God's desired design and intention for the world. Although sin enters and perverts God's good creation, this does not reverse God's desired intention for creation. Marriage is therefore an issue of creation design, not merely a response to the fall of man.
- (2) The original context of the verse - The verse is clearly meant to establish an institution based on the creation design. It's purpose in the original context is prescriptive not descriptive. Gen. 2:24 is not a statement about Adam and Eve, for they had no father and mother, but is instead a statement concerning all marriage relationships that follow based on God's creation of Adam and Eve.
- (3) The foundational nature of the verse in relationship to the rest of Scripture - This verse continues to be the core understanding of teaching on marriage throughout Scripture. Both Jesus (Matthew 19:5 – 6; Mark 10:6 – 9) and Paul (Eph.5:31) directly quote this verse in their teachings on marriage.

We see then, that Gen. 2:24 is foundational and central to the Biblical understanding of marriage and is consequently the key verse for how we define marriage.

## Defining Marriage

Now that we know our key verse, we must seek to define marriage based on the text. We define marriage as a *covenantal union between a man and a woman, which is God-ordained, publicly declared, and ordinarily sexually consummated.*<sup>2</sup> Our definition is made up of several different parts and in order to have a more complete

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from English Standard Version® (ESV®) Copyright © 2001 by Crossway

<sup>2</sup> Andreas J. Kostenberger and David Jones *God, Marriage, and Family (Second Edition): Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010) 270. The definition given here is a reworking of Kostenberger's and Jones definition for the purpose of emphasis and clarity.

understanding of the Biblical understanding of marriage it will be helpful to explore each tenant individually.

### ***“A covenantal union”***

Central to the definition, and the Biblical understanding of marriage, is the understanding that marriage is primarily a union. It is the joining, or uniting, of two individuals into a new singular unit. The Hebrew verb *dābaq* (דָּבַק), which is translated “hold fast” in Gen. 2:24 (literally “fasten oneself to an object”), carries with it this connotation of being joined or united together.<sup>3</sup> Marriage is, at its core, fundamentally a union. But how this union comes to be, that is how a man is joined with a woman, is through a covenant. This concept of marriage being a covenant is expressed elsewhere in the Old Testament.

*...the Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth.*

**Malachi 2:14 - 15**

*So you will be delivered from the forbidden woman,  
from the adulteress with her smooth words,  
who forsakes the companion of her youth  
and forgets the covenant of her God;*

**Proverbs 2:16 - 17<sup>4</sup>**

Scripture not only speaks to marriage as a covenant, but the very nature of Gen. 2:24 is filled with covenantal language and overtones.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it is best to understand that marriage is a covenant that takes place between a man and woman by which they are joined together into oneness.

### ***“Between a man and a woman”***

The verse also makes it explicitly clear that the covenantal union that takes place is between a man and a woman. Thus, we firmly hold that marriage is heterosexual and not homosexual in nature. Nowhere does Scripture refer to or portray marriage as homosexual, and in fact Scripture condemns homosexual actions as sinful.<sup>6</sup>

Further, the covenantal union in the verse takes place between a singular man and a singular woman, because of this, we firmly hold that marriage is monogamous and not polygamous. While Scripture speaks of and allows for polygamous relationships in the Old Testament, no where is this ever endorsed or commanded as God’s normative and ideal for human beings. Further, Paul restates God’s ideal for marriage in the church as being monogamous.

*Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.*

**1 Corinthians 7:1 – 2**

<sup>3</sup>Swanson, James. *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)*. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 1815.

<sup>4</sup> Both here and in Malachi the reference to the companion of your youth is a reference to marriage. Both passages speak to the breaking of the relationship in terms of the breaking of a covenant.

<sup>5</sup> Kostenberger and Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family*, 73 – 78. See this work for a further discussion on Marriage as a covenant.

<sup>6</sup> Lev 18:22, Romans 1:26 – 27, 1 Cor 6:9

*The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore, an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife...*

1Timothy 3:1 - 2

We see clearly that God's ideal for marriage is ultimately to be a covenant union between one man and one woman.

### ***"God-ordained"***

In recognizing the covenantal nature of the union that takes place in marriage, we also recognize that the marriage covenant is instituted and ordained by God. While in our self-determining world it is easy for us to think that marriage is merely a contractual agreement, where by parties can freely enter and freely break the agreement, the Biblical understanding is that marriage is that it is, in fact, a covenant which is ordained by God himself, even if a couple does not recognize this as true.<sup>7</sup> Jesus helps us to understand the nature of marriage in His teaching concerning divorce.

*And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."*

Matthew 19:4-6

Jesus teaches us a fundamental truth about the nature of the covenantal union, namely that it is God who is doing the joining. When a man and a woman join together in covenant relationship a mystery takes place. The mystery is that God himself joins the two into one. Therefore, marriage is not a human institution but a divine one, ordained, established, cultivated, and protected by God himself.

### ***"Publicly declared"***

The nature of marriage at its core is a divine institution, but it also has civil implications. In Gen. 2:24 the public nature of the covenantal union is such that a man "leaves his father and mother" in order to join to his wife. This is clearly public and has consequences for the social nature of the man and the woman's relationships. Marriage not only affects our private relationships, but also our familial, and by consequence, our public relationships as well. Therefore, it is important that the covenantal union is public and rightly entered into in view of both God and other people. A further implication of this is that civil institutions, such as governments, are to acknowledge and protect the marriage relationship. Where civil institutions do this in line with God's purpose and standards than Christian should submit to the legal requirements of marriage. Marriage is a public relationship and is therefore entered into publicly, and in the proper manner both Biblically and legally.

### ***"And ordinarily sexually consummated"<sup>8</sup>***

The sign and seal of the covenantal union that takes place is sexual intercourse, which is the physical manifestation of the joining of the two into "one flesh."<sup>9</sup> The sexual union of a couple points towards the greater union experienced both emotionally and spiritually when they are bound together in covenant. Sexual intimacy also works

<sup>7</sup> Kostenberger and Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family*, 270.

<sup>8</sup> The term ordinarily is utilized to acknowledge that there are times where physical and emotional limitations prevent a couple from engaging in sexual intercourse. While we believe that sex is a key part of the marriage covenant, we by no means desire to communicate that those who are hindered in their ability to have sexual intercourse are some how less united.

<sup>9</sup> Kostenberger and Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family*, 77.

to cultivate the oneness of a marriage relationship. God's design is that sex is to be reserved for the marriage relationship and is the physical representation and consummation of the greater relational union. While sex outside of the marriage relationship does not determine marriage relationships, it should be noted that sex still has a profound uniting effect between two people. The Apostle Paul acknowledges this in his First Letter to the Corinthians.

*Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, "The two will become one flesh."*

**1 Corinthians 6:15 - 16**

The Biblical teaching is that, because of its very nature and power, sex is to be reserved for a man and a woman who enter into the covenant union of marriage. Any and all sexual activity outside of this design is a perversion and therefore sinful.

### The Gospel and Marriage

Having defined marriage, it is also helpful for us to recognize that marriage is not ultimately an end in itself, but is meant to point to a much greater reality. Namely, it is meant to be a picture of the God who designed marriage and more specifically the relationship between Christ Jesus and His bride, the church. Paul writes concerning marriage,

*"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.*

**Ephesians 5:31 – 33**

It's clear from this passage that marriage is meant to point to the greater mystery of Christ's relationship to His people, the church. This relationship is ultimately developed and sustained through The Gospel. Therefore, marriage is not simply a human institution, but a divine one, and its purpose and meaning is found ultimately in God, not human beings. For, if marriage is created for a greater purpose, namely to be a picture of Christ and His church, than defining marriage is not merely a philosophical issue, but a theological one. Its definition has an effect on how we picture the work of the Gospel in the relationship of Christ and His church. This is why the way marriage is both defined and practiced is ultimately a God and Gospel issue and the church must be faithful to the clear teaching of Scripture in its understanding of marriage.

### Honoring Marriage

This article begins with the verse from Hebrews calling marriage to be held in honor. If we are called to honor marriage then it is important to understand the relationship that we are honoring. While the world treats marriage and sexual relationships as human entities that can be defined and practice according to our latest cultural whims and fancies, we, however, unequivocally seek to hold to and honor the clear definition of marriage as given to us by God and revealed in Scripture. There are countless implications of these truths for the church and marriages in general. It is not the nature of this article to explore those. However, it should be noted that a clear understanding and defining of marriage will aid and inform better marriage relationships and practices. Further, in view of the redefining of marriage that is taking place in western society and because marriage is a God-ordained institution, it behooves the church to stand for and defend the Biblical definition of marriage. We must honor marriage, both in defending the truth of marriage and also by seeking to cultivate robust, Biblical marriages within our church.

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