

GOD'S INTENTION FOR VIRGINITY AND MARRIAGE

And the Related Issues of Divorce and Remarriage

Notice: Please read this article in its entirety in one sitting. This is necessary to appreciate the full context of each part. Please do not read only part of this article.

This decision to marry is the most significant and most intimate decision a human being has to make as an earthly creature. Thereupon, a man and a woman enter a relationship in which everything is shared, whether emotional, mental, spiritual – or physical. Since human beings possess some very private treasures (such as thought dreams, desires of the heart, spiritual beliefs and a physical body), it is normal, in society, to withhold those things from public view and to share some of them only with the dearest of friends. It is also normal to reserve one's most intimate treasures for the person with whom a marriage trust is entered.

Some choose never to enter this sacred pact. All their lives they may live in chaste virginity and use their full energy to glorify God, or pursue personal interests. God grants this privilege to a few choice servants upon whom He bestows the gift of celibacy.

The rest, who are driven by the human passions that draw men and women together, seek a mate with whom to share all of oneself. It is a decision that irreversibly alters a person's life; for once made, the individual will never be able to return to the state of virginity.

Marriage, thus, is a sacred institution. It is ordained by God. It is defined by divine words. And, it is governed by moral principles which man has no right to alter. As such, its value is immeasurable and it must be preserved in exactly the form in which it was given to the human race.

A large segment of humanity dismisses virginity and marriage as archaic and indulges in unrestricted licentious activity without regard to any code of morality. Such persons breeze in and out of marriage "contracts," participate in impersonal sexual activities, and casually cross the lines of perversion as though they were meaningless forms of entertainment.

The world's disorientation from the truth, however, is no basis for a child of God to rethink Biblical concepts. Unfortunately, this is happening in contemporary Christianity. With great skill, worldly people are able to make Christians of strong conviction sound unloving and even hateful. Many believers, failing to recognize the Devil's game, would rather compromise their understanding of truth than appear antagonistic.

As this happens over a period of time, the restraining force of morality gradually disintegrates and society at large becomes increasingly more bold in its defiance of God's intention for human relationships. Immoral and perverted forms of behavior assume the appearance of normalcy. They never are normal in terms of reality, but a corrupt society, in which right and wrong are fused together in a moral neutralism, has no means to perceive things from a divine viewpoint when God's ambassadors surrender the standard.

For this reason, truth must be preached in every possible forum lest the same process inhibit the discernment powers of Christians. Redundancy is irrelevant because it would be better to have the message penetrate hearts through repetition than to speak insufficiently and lose all sense of divine morality in the minds of the next generation.

Young people must be taught that God intends for them to save virginity until marriage and to have a single marriage for life. To dangle alternatives before people in their formative years goes far beyond the risk of losing the sacredness of virginity and marriage. It teaches youth that God's standards are relative and may be adjusted when they are not compatible with human experience. It dilutes the integrity of all

absolute standards of righteousness and suggests that we do what God wants until it does not work and then we may change course and fend for ourselves.

Herein lies the expediency of the words that follow. Read on with a willingness to believe that God's words are absolutely correct and that to uphold them is our sacred duty.

Virginity: A Divine Treasure.

God is emphatic concerning the sacredness of virginity. He declares it to be chaste (clean and pure) and insists that if given away, it be offered only to the person with whom one is joined in marriage (II Corinthians 11:2, Leviticus 21:13). Otherwise it is to be preserved intact.

To underscore this sacredness, God ordered severe consequences for violating virginity. He said it is good for a man not to touch a woman outside of marriage. To do so is fornication - a sinful and morally unacceptable act (I Corinthians 7:1-2; Proverbs 7). In Jewish Law (which reflects God's values), a man caught stealing a woman's virginity was required to marry her or pay a full dowry if her father forbade the marriage (Exodus 22:16-17). A promiscuous girl could be stoned to death if she was not a virgin at the time of her marriage (Deuteronomy 22:20-21).

Maintaining one's virginity throughout a life time is an immense task and must not be tried without the ability to shun all sexual interest. This ability is a divine gift. Without it, a person must marry (Matthew 19:11-12; I Corinthians 7:1-2). With it, a person is free to expend all of his energy caring for the things that belong to the Lord (I Corinthians 7:32).

Marriage: As God Intended It To Be

For those who do not have the resources to remain celibate for a life time, Jesus very precisely stated God's intention for marriage.

Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. Matthew 19:4-6

Marriage is to consist of one man and one woman joined together in one relationship. Once they have experienced total intimacy of heart, soul and body, all the personal and private things of each are commonly shared and the two become one. This is to be a permanent relationship severed only by the physical death of one of the persons involved (Romans 7:2-3; I Corinthians 7:39).

So special is this consummation of two human beings that God uses it to illustrate the precious relationship between His Son and the Church (Ephesians 5:23-27). This is an indivisible union in which Christ takes the Church to himself as His bride. Christians who marry have the wonderful opportunity to portray to the world around them the unconditional love and imperishable commitment a believer enjoys with the Saviour. No greater achievement could be enjoyed in this world than to be a faithful husband or wife in a lifelong marriage.

Violations: Tampering With What God Intended

It is extremely dangerous for man to tamper with what God intends. Jesus said that God is the one who puts two people together in a marriage relationship and man has no business dismantling what God has assembled (Matthew 19:6) or distorting what God has created (Matthew 19:9). As with virginity, God

underscores the sacredness of marriage by establishing consequences for violating this covenantal trust. There are two ways that marriage can be violated.

1. By Entering "Marriages" That Are Not Real Marriages

One violation of the Divine intention for marriage is a form of fornication in which two people enter a relationship God says can never be a real marriage in His eyes. To define what He means, He outlined numerous relationships which fit this description. This list eliminates the union of two people who enjoy certain close family ties and the union of two people of the same sex (Leviticus 18). It is possible for people in these categories to enter a relationship which man calls "marriage," even though God has labeled it fornication (e.g. I Corinthians 5:1 with Leviticus 18:8). However, man's label does not overrule God's label. God is so set against such unacceptable unions that they comprise the only situations in which He sanctions a "marriage" relationship to be severed (Matthew 19:9).

[Please note in Matthew 19:9, Jesus says "except for fornication," not "except for adultery." This will be further explained below.]

2. By the Violation of Real Marriages

The other means of violating the sacredness of the marriage trust is to commit adultery. This is the term God uses to describe any act by which a married person involves himself sexually with someone other than the partner in his original marriage covenant including both unfaithfulness and remarriage. Remarriage though is treated less severely than unfaithfulness apparently because God has chosen to be merciful in cases where people at least attempt to follow legal procedures, even though these legal procedures are man made (Leviticus 20:10; Matthew 5:28; Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18). God is so adamant about this matter that He included a ban on adultery as one of the Ten Statutory Laws (Commandments) for mankind (Exodus 20).

The point of adultery is that you can give your virginity only to one person. To offer your private treasures to a second person, even in a relationship which God otherwise recognizes as a real marriage, is an adulterous act in violation of the original marriage covenant (Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18). In His choice of words. Jesus said that God would recognize the severance of a marriage pact only in the case of fornication (a relationship which God says can never be a real marriage anyway). He did not say "except for adultery," even though a popular interpretation of Christ's words insists that He did. In fact, He said if a marriage was severed for any reason other than fornication, an unbiblical union, remarriage would be an adulterous act, the violation of a Biblical union (Matthew 19:9). The disciples were so astounded at this narrow exception clause that they declared it would be better never to get married than to be so confined to a single relationship (Matthew 19:10). Jesus cautioned them, however, that celibacy should never be tried by those to whom the gift had not been given (Matthew 19:11-12).

Consequences and Forgiveness

Fornication and adultery are common to society and have been for a very long time. There are two forms of fornication: sexual activity outside of marriage and participation in a relationship which God says can never be a real marriage. There are two ways to commit adultery: by committing a sexual act or fantasy which violates a marriage covenant while the relationship is in tact (including bigamy) and by entering into a second marriage relationship after divorce.

Unfortunately, fornication and adultery are also becoming common to the Christian community. How is the Church to deal with its members who participate in such things?

1. Concerning Both Forms of Fornication

God has given some very definite procedures to follow when a person is found guilty of fornication. He is to be immediately separated from the fellowship of the Congregation and instructed concerning the seriousness of his sin. The purpose of these actions is to protect the sanctity of the group and to recover

the wayward person from his spiritual crisis (I Corinthians 5; II Corinthians 2; II Corinthians 12:21; Ephesians 5:3-5). Fornication is a very serious matter which God condemns extensively throughout scripture.

2. Concerning the Violation of an In Tact Marriage Relationship

The Old Testament Law prescribed the severest of punishments for those who committed sexual acts with a person other than their marriage partner. The sentence was the death penalty (Leviticus 20:10, John 8:3-5). In the New Testament, Israel lacked the authority to enforce the death penalty without the approval of the Roman Government. This was not, however, an excuse to substitute divorce for death. By decreeing the death penalty, God was decreeing that He did not want adulterers running loose in society. Nor did He want the victims of adultery to remarry without a divinely approved termination of the original marriage.

The Pharisees tested Christ on the subject by bringing a woman to Him who had been caught in the very act of adultery. In His famous reply, Jesus may have indicated by His writing on the ground that this woman was set up and the group of men were guilty of conspiracy, making them as guilty as she, or more so. This would explain their inability to cast stones upon one whom they had entrapped. Jesus let the woman go, but did not minimize the seriousness of adultery because he exhorted her never to do such a thing again to which we hoped she readily agreed (John 8:6-11).

3. Concerning Divorce and Remarriage

This is a most delicate matter. Many people, unbelievers and believers alike, enter into a second marriage without a working knowledge of Biblical teaching on the matter. Secular Law has made divorce very easy and the man-made contrivance of a bill of divorcement has always been for the purpose of freeing a person from one marriage to make them eligible for another.

It sounds harsh and cruel to say that remarriage is an adulterous act because there are so many well meaning people who have entered second marriages with much better spouses than their first one was. Yet, this is the way God Himself describes it and short of changing the Word of God, we cannot get around it (Mark 10:11; Luke 16:18).

The popular trend is to be conciliatory by means of a generous interpretation of Christ's exception clause in Matthew 19:9. The suggestion is that an act of fornication by one person in a legitimate marriage releases the other member of the marriage to find a new relationship. This argument is nullified, however, by the observation that Christ did not say "except for adultery" but He did say "except for fornication." Every violation of a legitimate marriage is called adultery, not fornication. If sexual unfaithfulness to a legitimate marriage partner is what Christ meant, He would have said, "except it be for adultery." Fornication, on the other hand consists of only two things, either a sexual act outside the context of marriage or an unbiblical union. The distinction between fornication and adultery has a very specific bearing on the meaning of what Christ said. Christ was teaching that God only sanctions the termination of unreal marriages. He never recognizes the termination of real marriages (Matthew 19:19:6,9) except by the death of one of the partners, either natural or by penalty for sin (Romans 7, Leviticus 20:10).

Divorce is a man-made device, and it only works in the eyes of mankind. God does not recognize divorce as a termination of a marriage covenant; instead He hates divorce and repudiates it (Malachi 2:16).

Divorce occurs because of the hardness of man's heart (Matthew 19:8). Before the Jewish Law was instituted, man had already made the exercise a habit. So, God specified some regulations to minimize the harm done to women by unreasonable men, not to encourage divorce as an acceptable behaviour (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). In the New Testament, God instructed divorced persons to remain

unmarried or be reconciled to each other (I Corinthians 7:11). Believers, He said, are not bound to contend a separation from an unbelieving spouse because peace facilitates a witness better than strife (I Corinthians 7:15-16). Once the departed spouse is saved, reconciliation will be easier. Remarriage to a different person, however, closes the door to reconciliation for ever; not an option suggested by God.

[I Corinthians 7:27-28 is a context which addresses the activity of virgins and refers to engaged couples. Espousal in Biblical days was binding and required a Bill of Divorcement to terminate. Since the marriage was never consummated, the persons involved were still virgins after the divorce takes effect. Divorced virgins that marry do not sin because they are still virgins. It, therefore, cannot be used as a Scriptural approval of divorce and remarriage.]

Indeed, those who are already divorced and remarried should **not** be branded with a scarlet letter.

If they understand what God has said about the matter, if they have dealt with it in their own hearts before Him, and if they remain committed to uphold God's ideals for marriage in their current relationship, there is no reason why their status should even be an issue in their fellowship and service within the Body of Christ. There is only a very narrow exception in cases where God has regulated the qualifications for certain offices.

The consequence of remarriage is of a lesser degree than other forms of adultery. Instead of a punishment inflicted, it consists of a qualification removed. In the Old Testament, divorced women were ineligible as wives for priests. If a Levite were to marry such a woman he would be disqualified from serving (Leviticus 21:7). In the New Testament, men are disqualified from being either an Elder or Deacon if they marry while a former spouse is still living (giving him two wives in God's eyes even though men may consider him to have only one). Also women are disqualified from being a widow indeed if she had married while a former spouse was still living (I Timothy 5:9).

The delicacy of the matter is in assuring the comfortableness of forgiven Christians while at the same time upholding the standards that God has decreed. The welfare of the Christian community requires that we be able to have a rational discussion on such a sensitive subject without projecting personal criticism from one side or sensing personal offense on the other side. At some point in the discussion, it is essential for persons from every side to put away the biases of their personal experience and honestly address the statements of Scripture concerning virginity, marriage and related matters — and to do so on the basis of what God has actually said, not on the basis of what we want Him to have said.

4. Forgiveness and Service

Total forgiveness may be experienced by anyone who has committed either fornication or adultery. In the Corinthian Church of Biblical times, there were some who had committed fornication and others who were guilty of adultery. All of them, who had received Christ as their Saviour, had been washed clean of their sin, sanctified from their guilt and justified before God (I Corinthians 6:9-11).

The only distinction is that forgiveness, while it restores fellowship, cannot restore qualification (Ezekiel 44:10-14). Anyone who is forgiven for any sin, regardless of its nature, may enjoy all of the fellowship of the Body of Christ and participate in its activities and service. But where God has specifically designated certain regulations for areas of service, such as Elders and Deacons, each person has only one opportunity in a life time to qualify. Regardless of which regulation has been violated, disqualification is permanent. Where God has not specified regulations for other areas of service, forgiven Christians may participate in a variety of Christian service activities, demonstrating how the grace of God has fully restored the individual to the fellowship of the Body of Christ.

This is difficult for some wonderful Christian men because they have been disqualified from serving the highest offices in the Church before they even knew about the regulations. In gestures of generosity, many churches are setting aside these qualifications and letting men serve in spite of them. The gravity of such a move is that out of fairness, all other qualifications must also be set aside, creating a situation in which a church may be forced to accept ungodly and irresponsible men as its leaders. Or else, if other qualifications are not set aside, the church offends a segment of the Congregation because of its unfair,

selective policies. Real fairness to the Body of Christ is to maintain all of the qualifications, even if this makes the number of potential leaders quite small and even if it means a particular man qualifies in every regard except one. Among all Christians, it is expedient that Elders and Deacons fulfill the mandate of the Old Testament Priests in demonstrating the difference between what is holy and what is unholy (Leviticus 10:10). This is not designed to offend men who just miss qualifying by one point. It is designed to show that God means what He says without exception.

Conclusion

Do we want our children to move closer to the things God desires for them or to move further away? Shall we set before them a set of ideals for which to strive? Or will we surrender to the hardness of man's heart (for the sake of being humanly "realistic") and teach our children a set of alternatives because they undoubtedly will need them?

Marriage is the most beautiful gift God ever made for human relationships. Virgity is the most precious possession He issued to human individuals. When He created them, God had a particular thing in mind for each. It is reasonable to want God's original intention for these things to be the basis of the convictions we hand down to the next generation of the Body of Christ.

In a time when preacher after preacher is giving in and performing wedding ceremonies for people who have a former spouse still living, I refuse to do so. It is not because I do not love these people and do not want them to experience the blessings of a fruitful relationship. It is because I do not want to suggest to other people who are watching that marriage is a disposable item in God's eyes. For those who are already divorced and remarried, we should express great compassion toward them and confirm our love to them so they may grow in Christ from this point forward. But for those who are considering divorcing their spouse, we must warn of its dangers and assist them in salvaging what God Himself joined together.

This is the most difficult article I will probably ever write in my life time because it addresses the most personal issues of life and because I know many people who read it will be personally affected by its content. If you have taken any of these words personally and they offend you, I apologize, for this is not my intent. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the Biblical issues with you, if we can do it without regard to your personal experience. On the other hand, I cannot apologize for what I believe to be the plain words of Scripture. I invite you to read this article once again with an open Bible and an open heart and see for yourself if I have accurately represented God's intention for virgity and marriage.

