THE BIBLE'S TEACHING ON MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

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The Current Cultural Crisis

Incredible as it may seem, we can no longer assume that people in our culture understand what the proper definition of "marriage" and "the family" is. Not only is this a sad commentary on the impact of same-sex marriage activists on our society, it also shows how the culture's memory of the biblical tradition on which it is largely based is fading fast. What is marriage, biblically defined? And what is the biblical definition of a family? In this brief treatise on marriage and the family, we will take up these questions and proceed to discuss a number of related matters, such as singleness, divorce and remarriage, and homosexuality, in an effort to develop a full-orbed understanding of the biblical teaching on the subject. As I have sought to demonstrate at some length in my book *God, Marriage, and the Family: Rebuilding the Biblical*
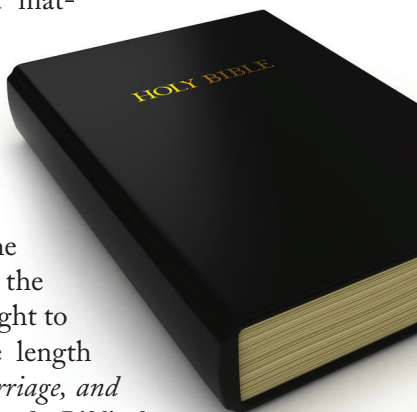
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Foundation, marriage and the family are institutions under siege today, and only a return to the biblical foundation of these God-given institutions will reverse the decline of marriage and the family in our culture today.

What Is the Family?

The Bible defines "family" in a narrow sense as *the union of one man and one woman in matrimony which is normally blessed with one or several natural or adopted children*. In a broad sense, this family also includes any other persons related by blood (the extended family). In the book of Genesis, we read that God in the beginning created first a man (Adam) to exercise dominion over his creation and subsequently a woman (Eve) as the man's "suitable helper" (Genesis 2:18, 20). Then, the inspired writer remarks, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24 ESV). This verse sets forth the biblical pattern as it was instituted by God at the beginning: one man is united to one woman in matrimony, and the two form one new natural family. In this regard, "become one flesh" not only refers to the establishment of one new family but also to the husband and wife's sexual union leading to the procreation of offspring. This, in turn, is in keeping with God's original command to the first human couple to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion" over all of creation (Genesis 1:28).

These aspects of marriage—the complementarity of male and female, and the irreplaceable role of male-female relations in reproducing the human race—are part of the original order of creation,

and are evident to all human beings from the enduring order of nature. These common elements of marriage are at the heart of our civil laws defining and regulating marriage. Therefore, people of all cultures and religions—including those who lack faith in God, Christ, or the Bible—are capable of participating in the institution of marriage. However, we who are Christians believe that the fullest understanding of God's will for marriage can be derived from a careful examination of scriptural teachings. It is incumbent upon the church to educate both itself and the larger culture regarding the full breadth and depth of God's intentions for marriage.

Marriage: Contract or Covenant?

Today, marriage and the family are regularly viewed as social conventions that can be entered into and severed by the marital partners at will. As long as a given marriage relationship meets the needs of both individuals involved and is considered advantageous by both sides, the marriage is worth sustaining. If one or both partners decide that they will be better off by breaking up the marriage and entering into a new, better marital union, nothing can legitimately keep them from pursuing their self-interest, self-realization, and self-fulfillment. To be sure, there is talk about the cost of divorce and the toll exerted on the children caught up in the marital separation of their parents, but even such a toll is considered to be worth paying in order to safeguard the most cherished principles of our independent-minded, freedom-worshipping, individual rights-exalting culture. If one or both marriage partners want to get out of the marriage, nothing should hold them back, or else the culture's supreme values—individual choice and libertarian freedom—are not given their due.

Contract

By contrast, the Bible makes clear that, at the root, marriage and the family are not human conventions based merely on a temporary consensus and time-honored tradition. Instead, Scripture teaches that family was God's idea and that marriage is a divine, not merely human, institution. The implication of this truth is significant indeed, for this means that humans are not free to renegotiate or redefine marriage and the family in any way they choose but that they are called to

preserve and respect what has been divinely instituted. This is in keeping with Jesus' words, uttered when his contemporaries asked him about the permissibility of divorce: "What therefore God has joined together let not man separate" (Matthew 19:6). For this reason, marriage is far more than a human social contract; it is a divinely instituted covenant.

Covenant

But what is a "covenant"? In essence, a covenant is a contract between two parties that is established before God as a witness, a contract whose permanence is ultimately safeguarded by none other than God himself. In this sense, marriage is a covenant: it is entered into by the husband and the wife before God as a witness. Because it is ultimately *God* who has joined the marriage partners together, the husband and the wife vow to each other abiding loyalty and fidelity "till death do us part." Rightly understood, therefore, a marriage entered into before God involves three persons: a husband, a wife, and God. For this reason, it is not self-interest, human advantage, or an unfettered commitment to personal freedom that governs the marriage relationship, but the husband and wife's joint commitment to conduct their marriage based on God's design and sovereign plan.

What Is Marriage?

Marriage is a covenant, a sacred bond between a man and a woman instituted by and publicly entered into before God and normally consummated by sexual intercourse. God's plan for the marriage covenant involves at least the following five vital principles:

PERMANENCE

(1) *The permanence of marriage*: Marriage is intended to be permanent, since it was established by God (Matthew 19:6; Mark 10:9). Marriage represents a serious commitment that should not be entered into lightly or unadvisedly. It involves a solemn promise or pledge, not merely to one's marriage partner, but before God. Divorce is not permitted except in a very limited number of biblically prescribed circumstances (see *Divorce* below).

SACREDNESS

(2) *The sacredness of marriage*: Marriage is not merely a human agreement between two consenting individuals (a "civil union"); it is a relationship before and under God (Genesis 2:22). Hence, a "same-sex marriage" is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. Since Scripture universally condemns homosexual relationships (see further under *Homosexuality* below) God will never sanction a marital bond between two members of the same sex.

INTIMACY

(3) *The intimacy of marriage*: Marriage is the most intimate of all human relationships, uniting a man and a woman in a "one-flesh" union (Genesis 2:23–25). Marriage involves "leaving" one's family of origin and "being united" to one's spouse, which signifies the establishment of a new family unit distinct from the two originating families. While "one flesh" suggests sexual intercourse and normally procreation, at its very heart the concept entails the establishment of a new kinship relationship between two previously unrelated individuals (and families) by the most intimate of human bonds.

MUTUALITY

(4) *The mutuality of marriage*: Marriage is a relationship of free self-giving of one human being to another (Ephesians 5:25–30). The marriage partners are to be first and foremost concerned about the wellbeing of the other person and to be committed to each other in steadfast love and devotion. This involves the need for forgiveness and restoration of the relationship in the case of sin. Mutuality, however, does not mean sameness in role. Scripture is clear that wives are to submit to their husbands and to serve as their "suitable helpers," while husbands are to bear the ultimate responsibility for the marriage before God (Ephesians 5:22–24; Colossians 3:18; see also Genesis 2:18, 20).

EXCLUSIVENESS

(5) *The exclusiveness of marriage*: Marriage is not only permanent, sacred, intimate, and mutual; it is also exclusive (Genesis 2:22–25; 1 Corinthians 7:2–5). This means that no other human relationship must interfere with the marriage commitment between husband and wife. For this reason, Jesus treated sexual immorality of a married person, including even a husband's lustful thoughts, with utmost seriousness (Matthew 5:28; 19:9). For the same reason, premarital sex is also illegitimate, since it violates the exclusive claims of one's future spouse. As the Song of Solomon makes clear, only in the secure context of an exclusive marital bond can free and complete giving of oneself in marriage take place.

How Did Sin Affect Marriage and the Family?

Knowing the divine ideal for marriage, and aware that marriage and the family are divine institutions, we are now able to move from God's creation of man and woman and his institution of marriage to the Fall of humanity and its negative consequences on the marriage relationship. As a study of biblical history shows, humanity's rebellion against the Creator's purposes led to at least the following six negative consequences: (1) polygamy; (2) divorce; (3) adultery; (4) homosexuality; (5) sterility; and (6) gender role confusion.

Polygamy

The first shortcoming, *polygamy*—more specifically, polygyny, marrying multiple wives—violates God's instituted pattern of marital monogamy. While it was certainly within God's prerogative and power to make more than one wife for the man, God only made Eve. Yet within six generations after the fall of humanity, barely after Adam had died, Lamech took two wives (Genesis 4:19). Later, prominent men in Israel's history such as Abraham, Esau, Jacob, Gideon, Elkanah, David, Solomon, and others engaged in polygamy. However, not only did polygamous marriage fall short of God's original design, it regularly resulted in disruptive favoritism, jealousy between competing wives, and decline into idolatry.

Divorce

The second compromise of God's ideal for marriage was *divorce*, which disrupted the permanence of marriage. While divorce became so common that it had to be regulated in the Mosaic code (Deuteronomy 24:1–4), the Bible makes clear that God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16). Divorce is also used repeatedly as an analogy for spiritual apostasy (Isaiah 50:1; Jeremiah 3:8).

Adultery

A third shortcoming was *adultery*, the breaking of one's marriage vows. The Decalogue stipulates explicitly, "You shall not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18). An egregious case of adultery was David's sin with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11). In cases such as these, the principle of marital fidelity to one's marriage partner was compromised. The Book of Proverbs calls adultery both foolish and dangerous (e.g. Proverbs 2:16–19; 5:3–22; 6:32–33; 7:5–23; 9:13–18). In

the Old Testament, adultery is frequently used as an analogy to depict the spiritual unfaithfulness of God's people Israel (Jeremiah 3:8–9; Ezekiel 16:32, 38; Hosea 1:1–3:5).

Homosexuality

Homosexuality, fourth, marks another falling away from God's creation purposes in that it violates the divine will for marriage to be between one man and one woman. As Genesis 2:24 stipulates, "A *man* [masculine] shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his *wife* [feminine], and the two shall become one flesh." Heterosexuality is the only possible arrangement for marriage, as the Creator has commanded and expects married couples to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (Genesis 1:28). Since homosexuality involves same-sex intercourse that cannot lead to procreation, it is unnatural and cannot logically entail the possibility of marriage.

Sterility

A fifth shortcoming of God's ideal for marriage is *sterility*, which falls short of the fertility desired by the Creator. Fertility is implicit in the biblical reference to the "one flesh" union. At times, lack of fertility is said in the Old Testament to be the result of personal sin (Genesis 20:17–18; 2 Samuel 6:23), while on other occasions sterility is presented as a simple fact of (fallen) nature (Genesis 11:30; 25:21; 30:1; 1 Samuel 1:2). However, God is often shown to answer prayers for fertility offered by his people in faith (e.g. 1 Samuel 1:9–20).

Gender Confusion

Gender role confusion is a sixth and final result of humanity's rebellion against the Creator. Where God's design for man and woman to be distinct yet complementary partners in procreation and stewardship of God's earth is diluted, people will inexorably be confused about what it means to be masculine or feminine, and the lines between the two sexes made by God will increasingly be blurred.

Despite the above-mentioned ways in which God's original design for marriage and the family was compromised, however, the Bible in the Old Testament continues to extol the virtues of the excellent wife (Proverbs 31:10–31) and to celebrate the beauty of sex in marriage (Song of Solomon).

The Restoration of God's Original Design for Marriage and the Family in Christ

The New Testament teaches that the restoration of God's original design for marriage in Christ is part of God's realignment of all things under Christ's authority and lordship. In the book of Ephesians, we read that it is God's purpose "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Ephesians 1:10, NIV). Thus marriage is not an end in itself but part of God's end-time restoration of all things in the person of Jesus Christ. Part of this restoration is that all evil powers are brought under control and are submitted to the supreme authority of Christ (Ephesians 1:21–22). Later on in the same

letter, Paul addresses the subject of marriage in general, and marital roles in particular, within the larger context of believers needing to be filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18).

What is the biblical pattern for marriage? This is best seen in a close study of the pre-eminent passage on marital roles in the New Testament, Ephesians 5:21–33. In this passage, instructions are given to both husbands and wives in form of a "house table," which features commands given first to the person under authority followed by instructions for the person in a position of authority. In keeping with this pattern, the passage addresses first wives, then husbands (Ephesians 5:22–33); first children, then parents (Ephesians 6:1–4); and first slaves, and then mas-

ters (Ephesians 6:5–9; similar "house tables" are also found in Colossians 3:18–4:1 and 1 Peter 2:11–3:7).

Wives, for their part, are called to submit to their own husbands, as to the Lord. As the church submits to Christ, so wives should to their husbands in everything (Ephesians 5:21–24). Husbands, in turn, are to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. They are to provide for their wives both physically and spiritually and to cherish them as God's special provision for them (Ephesians 5:25–30). As Christian husbands and wives live out these marital roles, God's original creation design for marriage will be fulfilled once again: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh" (Ephesians 5:31, citing Genesis 2:24).

As mentioned, this pattern of headship and submission is placed within the larger context of Christ's headship over all other powers, which Paul addressed at the beginning of his letter to the Ephesians (see Ephesians 1:10, 20–23). Paul returns to this subject at the end of his epistle where he urges all Christians—including husbands and wives, parents and children—to put on the "whole armor of God" so they can stand against the devil (Ephesians 6:10; for the various pieces in this spiritual "armor," see Ephesians 6:14–18). In this warfare, believers' struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the evil supernatural (Ephesians 6:12). Armed with truth, righteousness, the gospel, faith, salvation, and God's word, they will be able to stand firm and resist the devil "in the evil day" (Ephesians 6:13). The reality of the power of Satan and his forces explains at least in part why there is so much

conflict in many marriages and families today. It also helps account for the widespread nature of divorce and the massive assault on marriage as an institution in our contemporary culture.

Singleness

We turn now to a discussion of singleness and the unmarried state. In Old Testament times, singleness was rare among individuals old enough to marry. Those unmarried were therefore limited to widows, eunuchs, those who could not marry due to diseases such as leprosy or severe economic difficulties, those who did not marry because of some type of divine call, those who had undergone a divorce, or unmarried young men and women. Thus marriage was the overwhelming norm in Old Testament times, in keeping with the foundational creation narrative in Genesis 1 and 2.

In the New Testament, a somewhat different picture emerges. Major figures such as John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul, and Timothy were unmarried. Jesus spoke favorably about "eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:12), and Paul even called celibacy a "gift from God" (1 Corinthians 7:7). He further suggested that married people's interests were divided while the unmarried could devote themselves wholly to the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:32–35). What is more, Jesus taught that in the eternal state, there will be no more marriage, but all will be "like angels in heaven" (Matthew 22:29–30).

Thus we see in the sweep of biblical history a trend from marriage as the norm (with singleness being limited to exceptional cases), to a place

where the advantages and disadvantages of both marriage and singleness are affirmed (in Jesus and Paul), to a marriage-less state in heaven where the only "marriage" will be that of Jesus, the heavenly bridegroom, to the church as his spiritual "bride."

Homosexuality

What does the Bible teach on the subject of homosexuality? As mentioned, the Genesis creation account stipulates heterosexual, not homosexual, marriage as God's original design. Homosexuality falls short in several critical ways. First, homosexual relationships fall short in the area of *procreation*, since they are by their very nature not able to fulfill God's creation mandate for humanity to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth.

Second, homosexuality also violates another cardinal underlying principle of God's creation design for human relationships, namely that of *complementarity*. The very fact that in some homosexual relationships one partner takes on a male and the other a female role (attested by two different Greek words for homosexuality in the New Testament) provides indirect support for the complementarity inherent in the divine creation design.

In recent years, homosexual advocates have argued that the Bible, rightly interpreted, does not forbid homosexual relationships, only *perverse expressions* of such. For example, they have argued that God's judgment on Sodom on Gomorrah (Genesis 18:17–19:29) was merely for these cities' inhospitality, not for the sin of homosexuality. However, while Sodom and Gomorrah did in fact show a lack of hospitality, it is hardly con-

ceivable that God would punish these cities by utter annihilation for this comparatively minor offense. Also, the Epistle of Jude clearly states that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah "indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire" (i.e. homosexuality; Jude 7; cf. Romans 1:26–27).

With regard to the Levitical Holiness Code (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13), some have suggested that these passages prohibited only homosexual acts performed by Canaanite temple prostitutes as part of the worship of false gods, not homosexuality at large. However, these passages are clearly general in nature, which is seen by the application of the word "abomination" elsewhere also to incest, adultery, and bestiality (Leviticus 18:6–23). None of these sins are prohibited only in the context of idolatrous worship; all have broader, universal application. In the New Testament, Paul addresses the issue of homosexuality extensively in his letter to the Romans, where he writes, "For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error" (Romans 1:26–27). This is followed by a long list of vices (Romans 1:29–31). Again, the Bible's prohibition clearly refers to homosexuality at large, not merely to perverted forms of it (see also 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10).

Divorce

As mentioned, divorce is a result of the Fall of humanity. In the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 24:1–4 regulates divorce in ancient Israel. In Jesus' day, rabbinic schools lined up behind two major interpretations of this passage. The conservative school of Shammai allowed for divorce in cases of immodest behavior or sexual immorality. The more moderate school of Hillel allowed divorce in any instance where a wife had done something displeasing to her husband. It appears that this more permissive interpretation held sway among most of Jesus' contemporaries (see Matthew 19:3).

Jesus, for his part, interpreted the passage as allowing divorce only in cases of sexual immorality, that is, sexual marital unfaithfulness (Matthew 19:9; cf. Matthew 5:32; Greek *porneia*). Even in such cases, divorce is only permissible, not encouraged or even preferable. Instead, Jesus strongly insisted that marriage according to God's original design was lifelong and permanent, based on the statement in Genesis that a man will leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, "and they shall become one flesh" (Matthew 19:5, citing Genesis 2:24). Jesus' conclusion was therefore that, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matthew 19:6).

Paul, likewise, extolled the virtues of marriage (see especially Ephesians 5:21–33), calling on husbands to love their wives and on wives to submit to their husbands and to treat them with respect. The only legitimate divorce allowed by Paul is what has been called the "Pauline privilege." This refers to cases where in an unbelieving couple one of the spouses comes to faith in Christ and the other partner refuses to continue the marriage. Addressing this kind of situation, Paul stipulates, "But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace" (1 Corinthians 7:15).

Thus there are only two (or possibly three) biblically sanctioned instances of divorce: (1) sexual marital unfaithfulness (i.e. adultery); and (2) the unbelieving spouse's refusal to continue the marriage after the conversion of the other partner. In addition, marital separation (though not necessarily divorce) may be needed in cases of persistent physical spousal abuse.

Conclusion

The contemporary culture is in a deep crisis regarding marriage and family today. While the crisis has important political, social, and economic ramifications, in the ultimate analysis only a spiritual return to the biblical foundations will address the root issue of the current crisis. Marriage and the family were God's idea, and as divine institutions they are not open to human renegotiation or revision. As we have seen, the Bible clearly teaches that God instituted marriage as a covenant between one man and one woman, a lifelong union of two partners created in God's image to govern and manage the earth for him. In keeping with his wonderful design, the Creator will normally bless a married couple with children, and it is his good plan that a family made up of a father, a mother, and several children wit-

ness to his glory and goodness in a world that has rejected the Creator's plan and has fashioned a variety of God-substitutes to fill the void that can properly be filled only by God himself.

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