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## **Marriage**

*Written by Pete Grassow on behalf of a DEWCOM discussion group*

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa affirms the sanctity of Marriage. We believe that Marriage is given by God as a gift to enhance the union of two people in body, mind, and spirit. The Genesis description in the Garden of Eden of two people who are so intimately connected that they are “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” and who thus become “one flesh” is our ideal of marriage. This is the image captured by our marriage liturgy, which envisages a “lifelong union in body, mind and spirit.” The liturgy also suggests that this leads to a life of “mutual companionship, helpfulness and care,” adding that “such marriage is the foundation of true family life,” and is the best place for the nurture of children.

However, this is seldom the reality that we encounter in our daily lives. Increasingly we meet people who live together without first getting married; we meet people who live in loveless marriages that crush the life out of them; we meet people who have been divorced and seek re-marriage; and we meet single parents who care for children without being married.

We also live within an African context that challenges this concept of marriage: we encounter African traditional marriages that have not been blessed in church; we meet people who have a wife in the rural areas and another in the urban areas, and African traditions suggest that there is a possibility of a man having more than one wife.

In addition to the above, we are faced with people in same-sex relationships who either want to get married, or who have already chosen to get married. And so are asked to respond pastorally to gay and lesbian people who choose to speak of marriage in a way that is foreign to our church usage and practice.

How are we as a church to respond to a changed context? We have no wish to shift our definition of marriage to suit our context, because we believe that we ought to set a standard for our sinful society. Yet at the same time there is an incongruity in reading a liturgy that is so far removed from the reality of the lives of the people we marry. Somehow we need to find a way of discovering marriage in a way that gives life to broken people, rather than becoming the impossible ideal that only condemns people with its judgement of their shortcomings.

We believe that the Bible does inform us. But at the same time we recognise that there are divergent readings of the scripture:

### **Some Thoughts on a Biblical View of Marriage (Neill Robinson).**

The obvious passages upon which we would need to focus our attention are Genesis 2:24 – 25; Matthew 19:3 – 9 (Mark 10:2 – 12); Ephesians 5:21 – 33

The Genesis passage offers the following: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Genesis 2 vs.24). This points us to the preceding verses which shed light on God’s original understanding of marriage. These verses outline God’s intention for a marriage: that a man and a woman were made to live in a committed relationship with each other, for life.

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In the Gospel passages (Matthew 19 and Mark 10) Jesus refers to marriage as a response to divorce: One of the questions raised today in our discussions on marriage concerns the problem of upholding the church's present understanding of marriage in today's society where divorces is so rife. It would appear that Jesus' answer to the question about divorce in His society, where divorce appears to have been easy and common, was to return to the original intention of God in Gen.2!

The Ephesians passage reflects an understanding of the nature of a marriage relationship, but of course this passage requires a great deal of exegetical process to understand its meaning for today. Suffice to say that the Bible affirms marriage as depicting the same values of love and faithfulness as God's relationship with the Church.

Some would refer to other forms of marriage in the Old Testament (such as. Levirate, Polygyny, etc.). Perhaps, therefore, it needs to be stated that Gen.2 reflects God's intention in marriage after which comes The Fall in Gen. 3. What follows in the rest of the Old Testament is how God's people seek to deal with the reality of marriage and its breakdown in their corporate life.

Jesus seeks to bring us back to God's original intention. Jesus seems, therefore, to endorse the permanence of marriage. The "Matthean exception" in Jesus' discussion on divorce does not diminish his insistence that people can only marry once. Paul allowed divorce in a marriage between a Christian and a non-Christian, but left the decision to do so in the hands of the non-believing partner. In other words, if a non-Christian was prepared to continue living with their Christian spouse then the Christian was expected to remain in the marriage.

### **Another View on the Bible and Marriage (Pete Grassow and Yvette Moses)**

The Bible has a variety of relationships that were called marriage:

The standard nuclear family: Genesis 2:24 and Matthew 19:6 describe how a man leaves his mother and father and joins with a woman, consummates the marriage and lives as a couple. However in ancient Israel:

- Inter-faith marriages were forbidden. (Numbers 36:8 / Joshua 23: 12-16).
- Marriages were generally arranged by family or friends.
- And a bride who had been presented as a virgin and who could not be proven to be one was stoned to death by the men of her village. (Deuteronomy 22:13-21)  
There appears to have been no similar penalty for men who engaged in consensual pre-marital sexual activity.

Polygynous marriage: A man would marry his first wife. Then, as finances allowed, he would marry as many additional women as he desired. The new wives would join the man and his other wives in an already established household.

Levirate Marriage: This involved a woman who was widowed and had no son. She would be required to marry her brother-in-law, and they would be expected to bear a son. Their first-born son was considered to be sired by the deceased husband...see Genesis 38:6-10 / Deuteronomy 25:7-8.

A man, his wife, and her female slave : As illustrated in Genesis 16, Sarah was unable to bear children , but she owned Hagar, a female slave. Sarah gave Hagar to Abram as a wife, so that Abram would have an heir.

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A male and female slave: Exodus 21:4 allows a slave owner to assign one of his female slaves to one of his male slaves as a wife. When a male slave left his owner, the marriage would normally be terminated because his wife would stay behind, with any children that that had.

A male rapist and his victim: Deuteronomy 22:28-29 instructs a man who has raped a female virgin to marry her.

Celibacy – it is important to note that the Bible also advocates not getting married as the preferred option:

- Jesus promotes celibacy, but only for those who can handle it. It was a teaching added onto a statement about divorce: Matthew 19:9-12:
- Paul suggests that celibacy is a preferred choice in 1 Corinthians 7:1-2 and 1 Corinthians 7:7-9. Paul does add that this is intended only to those to whom God has given the gift of celibacy. Paul offers heterosexual marriage as an alternative option for those who would otherwise burn with sexual lust.

It would seem that the New Testament teaches that most people are happiest in a loving, supportive, committed marriage relationship. However, celibacy is to be seriously considered as a preferred option.

### And finally

Throughout the Bible marriage was considered a “normal” way of life with its primary purpose being the production of producing children and preservation of the family name. It is interesting to note that there is no word for “bachelor” in the Old Testament, and while there is reference to widows no “spinsters” are recorded either. Marriage is found in many different forms and reflects the general social culture of the Near Ancient world. It is therefore very difficult to speak about a Biblical View on Marriage – because each kind of marriage was a response to a particular time and culture. It is also difficult to write off all the models between Genesis and Matthew as “sinful” because neither the prophets nor the Biblical tradition does so. Jesus himself does not condemn any of the above models. All Jesus does is to offer two alternatives: either stay unmarried, or enter into a loving, committed relationship, which he sums up as follows: “*Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate*” (Matt 19:6).

### In Conclusion

Human relationships are complicated by the issues of marriage, singleness, divorce and living together. Changed times demand new ways of speaking about the way in which the love of God brings couples together and sustains their relationships. We as a church need to address people where we find them rather than where we might wish them to be: for example we could offer couples counsel on how to “move in together” well; we could help people celebrate African traditional marriages; and we could develop liturgies for ending a marriage in the presence of God. And we desperately need to decide how to minister to people in same-sex marriages. To this end much intentional discussion and prayer is required.