

MARRIAGE - WHOSE CHOICE IS IT ANYWAY?

Christian reflections on the choices concerning one's life partner.

Aims:

1. To guide a Christian to understand his/her present relationship to Christ, and to work through its practical implications in the choice of a marriage partner. Whose choice? and why?
 2. Christians may face three areas of potential religious difficulty, that ought to be faced before a relationship gets serious. These are explained – but are rarely tackled by other teachers/writers.
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Outline:

Part I - Introduction

Part II – Christian Marriage? God's Role – Love & Lordship

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Part I - Introduction

Among the most important of life's choices are

- our life's work
- our life's partner(s)

Work can usually be changed if we find it doesn't suit us, and it is widely held that the same should be true of marriage.

Folk are promoting as valid alternatives to the traditional view of marriage every possible variation of human relationship.

The traditional view sees marriage as a social contract voluntarily made by a binding oath joining together one man to one woman for life.

Where does your view come from?

It is inevitable that you already have some views about being single and about being married and these views can come from a whole variety of sources –

- from parents' example
- from parents' teaching (not necessarily the same!)
- from what you see among close family, relations, friends and work-mates
- from seeing others, happy or unhappy, and drawing your own conclusions
- from reading or hearing teaching on marriage
- from the examples of single and married lives shown by the media

When we first drive a car we already have a clear idea of the basic aim and the rules. It would be a recipe for disaster to make them up as we went along!

So too in marriage. It is better to have thought it through *before* embarking on any relationship that might lead to it, rather than making up the aims and rules as you go along!

Part II - Christian Marriage? God's Role – Love & Lordship

1. 'christians' and 'Christians'

My use of the small 'c' and the capital 'C' in this heading are important!

(a) Firstly, there are folk who know they are not, say, Muslim or Hindu, and they find themselves living in a culture that is strongly influenced by Christian things, e.g. (in the U.K.) celebrating Christmas.

They know that they are generally kind, not criminal, and have grown up to believe that the adjective 'christian' means *decently behaved*. So they adopt it for themselves.

(b) Secondly, there are other folk (who may not necessarily manage to live as good lives as some of the small-c 'christians' above) who also adopt the label 'Christ-ian'. They do so because the person of the *Christ* means something important to them. (The adjective of Christ retains the capital C when it describes anyone or anything linked closely to him.)

As likely as not these folk would opt to join in Christ-ian worship, and accept Christ-ian teaching, and intend to 'follow' the Jesus Christ.

- The first [(a) above], call themselves 'christians' because of their **behaviour**. These are 'christian' mainly by *culture* and *country*.

- The second [(b) above] call themselves 'Christians' because of their **belief in Christ**.

These are 'Christian' mainly by *creed* and *conviction*.

One cannot look at any of life's major questions (including of course those about being single or married) without first sorting out the above differences between the 'christian' and the 'Christian'.

Furthermore, if you call yourself a 'christian' because of your decent **behaviour**, then your outworking of life's important questions might be radically different from someone who would describe him/herself as a 'Christian' because of being an active follower of Jesus the **Christ**.

2. 'The Lord'? / 'My Lord'?

The followers of Jesus (Christians) are marked by the belief that Jesus Christ is **Lord** [Philippians 2:11].

There are two ways in which Christians so regard him, and it clarifies things to distinguish them. At one end of the spectrum are -

(a) Those who acknowledge the Lordship of Christ in *general*
i.e. **Jesus is THE Lord**

and, at the other end of the spectrum are -

(b) Those who acknowledge the Lordship of Christ in *particular*
i.e. **Jesus is MY Lord**

[Christian growth is often a matter of moving along the spectrum from (a) towards (b).]

All such Christians will worship Jesus as the Son of God.

The principle difference between the Christian for whom Jesus is the Lord in *general* terms and the Christian for whom he is the Lord in *personal* terms is:

- the latter will set out deliberately to **obey** him – which requires also –
 - getting to **know** him, and
 - learning to **listen** to him.

3. Three different ways of making decisions

The importance of what I have written so far becomes very clear when set out thus:

- (a) The non-religious person, 'christian' or otherwise,
will make a major decision with no conscious reference to God.
- (b) The religious person to whom Jesus is the Lord in a general sense
will make a major decision with probably a conscious reference to God.
- (c) The religious person to whom Jesus is my Lord in a personal sense
will aim to discern the Lord's decision and obey it.

The responsibility shifts as you work from (a) to (c) from

- the responsibility of **deciding**
- to
- the responsibility of **obeying**

4. The Question before all Others!

For a Christian dealing with the questions about being single or married, the question that has to come FIRST is -

whereabouts on the 'Ladder of Decision' do I allow Jesus to come?

- **Do I place Jesus *above* me in my decisions?**
- **Do I place Jesus *below* me in my decisions?**

[I fully understand if you've never before given it any thought and don't know.]

If you place Jesus 'below' yourself on your Ladder of Decision and you meet someone you could marry, you might say to Jesus:

'I hope you like my choice?'

If, however, you have allowed Jesus to be 'above' you on your Ladder of Decision and you meet someone you could marry, you would say something very different to him:

'Do you *want* me to marry him/her?'

What a world of difference there is between the two!
Some Christians will regard obedience as a perfectly natural (and Biblical) response to the Lordship of Jesus, but others will find the idea scary because of the strong secular views against authority. The next section explains this in more detail.

Part III - Christian Marriage : My Role – Freedom & Obedience

A negative view of obedience comes about because of its misuse by non-loving and sinful people. Such misuse can give us the impression that obedience

- takes away the freedom of the individual
- is an encroachment on 'rights'
- makes happiness impossible
- is only for the weak-willed, etc.

What people cannot handle well, God can! Within his total love of us and faithfulness to us, obedience to him becomes the very opposite of all we might fear!

Christianity is about **love** - not in a sloppy abstract way, but in a way that is timely and tangible.

- God loves the world so much that he sends his Son Jesus to die for us;
- We love him because he first loved us;
- The very same love that God has for us he put into our hearts by his Holy Spirit;
- This love overflows us back to him and out to others.

As such love between us and God grows, so our wills get increasingly 'in tune' with God's will, and we begin to merge with God's purposes. We increasingly find ourselves doing what he wants, being where he wants us to be, and thinking along-the-same-lines. (The role of Christian worship, teaching and fellowship is to encourage these.)

It is within this amazing 'love affair' that obedience finds a natural and positive place, for God knows better than we do, and he longs to guide us in ways which he knows are the best for us.

Let me give you an example:

Each Christmas is a celebration both of God's love and human obedience. Here are some lines of mine that sum up the Scripture teaching.

*And so to Nazareth God's Angel came
to Joseph's girl-friend. Mary was her name.
Thus favoured, and so called by God Most High
he trusted her to give the right reply.
She did! 'I am the servant of the Lord,
Let all things be according to your Word.'
Thus her assent made possible God's plan
that our Creator should be born a man.
So when the course of time had fully run
God's Spirit gave to Mary's womb – a Son!*

[From *The Coming of Christ*, a Christmas poem by John Richards,
see 'Christmas Resources' on this website.]

Where Jesus is welcomed as Lord, love and obedience are at the heart of our relationship with him. So the earliest Christians took the Greek term *doulos*, meaning ‘servant/slave’, to be at the heart of their faith:

Mary (Luke 1:38,48),
Simeon (Luke 2:29),
Disciples (Acts 4:29),
Tychicus (Colossians 4:7),
James (James 1:1),
Simon Peter (2 Peter 1:1),

Paul (Romans 1:1, Galatians 1:10),
Timothy (Philippians 1:1),
Jude (1),
John (Revelation 1:1).

Since God respects you and me more than anyone ever has or ever could, obedience to him has no negative side. A famous prayer for Peace said daily for centuries has the phrase ‘**whose service is perfect freedom**’. This is the very opposite of what is widely assumed!

Such ‘service’, such obedience, is not our being crushed under the demands of a ruthless overlord, but the flowering and blossoming of ourselves in a love-relationship with the one who created us, who showed his love by dying for us and who invites us to spend eternity in the joy of his company.

Obedience brings happiness!

Trust and obey, for there's no other way
to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.

For the *obedient* Christian therefore, the great questions concerning being single or married are:

'What is my Lord telling me to do?'

'What good thing is he planning for me next?'

God is infinitely wiser than we are, and his choices are far more varied and wonderful than the expectations of parents, relations, friends or society – and even *ourselves*!

God’s goals differ from our own. His plans may not coincide with what those close to us think is ‘desirable’ for us - by which they so often mean what is desirable for *them*! We do not exist to meet either their social, domestic or financial longings or to operate according to their time-schedule.

Obedience to God frees us from the great expectations of others and from the pressures to conform to them! What a relief!

(This is where the unexpected 'perfect freedom' of service becomes apparent.)

Single ?

Jesus was single – so was St. Paul. There can't be much wrong in *that*!

Since British society tends to regard sexual activity as essential it finds the lives of the single and chaste an embarrassment. When a group of teenagers had the opportunity to talk to a nun, their burning question – and quite rightly so – was ‘*How can you live without it?*’

In God’s family – the unmarried Christian (man or woman, boy or girl) is very precious. Mighty things have been done for God by those who are not yet married, or who have heard God’s call (‘*vocation*’) not to marry, or who have transformed widowhood by using the liberty and particular resources of the single life.

God's idea of family is not restricted to the concept of just Mum, Dad and two-point-four children! He has many rich and lovely ideas of families and fellowships, of human groupings of care and love.

His plans for an individual might be to embrace poverty or enjoy riches; to act now or to wait a while; to be celibate or to be married; to have no family or to have one’s own children and/or to adopt.

In addition God has countless other ‘families’ that need the time and talents that often the unmarried can most freely bestow – the special ‘families’ formed of need: the poor, the sick, the elderly; those in need of educational and practical help, and so on.

Part IV - Christian Marriage: the Norm & the Usual.

Most readers will know the Christian norm for marriage:

*One man and one woman
for love and for life.*

But the moment I write that and you read it – there comes to mind the many sincere people who have not been able to live up to that.

Here I can help you by introducing two words –

- the norm
- the usual

Never ever, ever, ever, ever confuse them!

While they can be the same, they sometimes differ greatly.

Here's an example. You go to the dentist with a decaying tooth.

When he examines your particular assortment of teeth with its usual fillings and extractions he doesn't send you away and tell you that what he has seen is quite **usual**!

He bases his work on the **norm**, which is a complete set of healthy white teeth – even if he only rarely comes across it! Indeed the more he gets used to the **usual**, the more effort he should make to keep the **norm** in sight!

The same two aspects are as true of marriage as they are of teeth!

- The *norm* is the standard which God in his love gives us;
- The *usual* is the state where God in his love helps us.

The Church is called both

- to *proclaim* God's goal for marriage

and

- to *pastor* those who miss that goal by expressing God's love, forgiveness and help.

The Church's task to *proclaim* the **norm** and to *pastor* the **usual** – is difficult, but inseparable, because they are two-sides-of-the-same-coin.

(The apparent uncertainty of the Church over issues of remarriage arises precisely because of the difficulty of having to say two opposite but complementary messages. Plus the fact that folk almost always prefer to keep things over-simplified rather than hold together opposite truths!).

PART V - Pre-Marriage - Three Difficulties

There are some issues which are rarely raised, but which need to be thought over *before* any relationship develops too far. Here are three of them -

1. THE CHRISTIAN AND NON-CHRISTIAN IN PARTNERSHIP

Here the distinctions I have made above between folk who call themselves 'christian' and 'Christian' are of vital importance.

‘Unequally Yoked’

Some readers will always have known that in traditional Christian teaching marriage to a non-Christian is simply *out of the question*.

St. Paul’s advice is clear and firm: ‘*be not unequally yoked*’ (to use the traditional phrase) or in more modern English ‘*Do not be mismatched*’ [2 Corinthians 6:14]

Do not be bound together with unbelievers, for what partnership has righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness... what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? (If St. Paul is referring here to relationships in *general*, as some think, then it would mean that a life-long marriage to a non-believer would be doubly unthinkable to him.)

Some Christian streams stress this teaching so much that leaders will, if necessary, veto a fellowship-member's choice of would-be partner. At the opposite extreme other Christians are fearful to convey Scripture's teaching for fear of being thought old-fashioned and dogmatic.

Being mismatched becomes highlighted when major decisions are being made.

Were a couple to come into a fortune, then there is potential friction if there is a fundamental difference in reaching decisions about it.

One person may make their decision with little or no reference to God, while the other could not tackle something so important without seeking to obey his/her Lord on the matter.

- what do we want to do with it?
- what does the Lord want us to do with it?

That is the potential difficulty of being 'mismatched', even when the couple are otherwise closely compatible in their behaviour. True, coming into a fortune is so unlikely that one need not plan for it, but the different approaches remain when it comes to ordinary and everyday items.

2. LIFE-AFFIRMING WITH LIFE-DENYING

There are two valid strands in Scripture and in the Church of every age. They balance each other :

- Liberty
- Caution

A text illustrating liberty is ***God has given us all things richly to enjoy***, [1 Timothy 6:17] and one illustrating caution is ***Deny yourself, take up your cross*** [Mark 8:34].

Like so many great Scriptural truths, they belong together: Liberty checked by Caution and Caution enriched by Liberty. (The mature Christian will not opt for one at the expense of the other, but will be disciplined in his/her liberty, freely able to say both ‘yes’ and ‘no’ to life.)

The two strands are, however, often kept apart to produce some Christians who are Life-affirming and others who are Life-denying. Sadly the distinction is rarely made or talked-out since Christians tend to gather in either life-affirming or life-denying groups, and view the ‘other’ with suspicion!

These two attitudes are deeply incompatible.

When I was at a theological college, I would feel it right sometimes to take a student out for a simple lunch, to give him the opportunity to chat over what was troubling him away from the college. I would, with a clear conscience, go to a local pub and not worry about being seen doing so. There was the occasional student who would be a little uneasy and would feel it necessary to slip in a side entrance for fear of being seen by a 'weaker brother'. I respected that.

I felt at such times that such a basic difference of spiritual style could happily be contained between two people for a short-while. But it alerted me to the fact that I would not much enjoy being linked to a life-partner whose style of spirituality was the opposite of mine – however much we were united in our love and service of Jesus Christ. (I was not married at the time, so the experience was an important one.)

It seemed obvious to me then, and now - some 40 years later, that unity in Christ is not enough, that there could be a mutual difficulty in a Christian marriage if one person is life-affirming and the other is life-denying.

They are almost opposite styles of living out one's faith, and a person whose spiritual convictions led him/her to be life-denying would bring that to all 'pleasures' - not least, perhaps, the marriage bed.

The Life-Affirming stream with its basis in ***God has given us all things richly to enjoy***, will view marital sex as a God-given expression of one-ness with immense potential for healing, reconciliation, joy and delight. The Life-Denying stream with its suspicion of pleasure and emphasis on ***denying oneself and taking up one's cross*** may see sexual activity only as a God-given means for procreating children.

[I use the terms Life-Affirming and Life-Denying here to try and get my essential point across. Neither term is very satisfactory, and Life-Denying can seem more negative than I mean it to be. I would not wish to put either style above or below the other. I see that they both have an important and balancing influence within the Body of Christ.]

That he/she is a 'fine Christian' need not mean that their style of Christian living is automatically compatible with yours for a happy life-partnership.

We need often to review our own position on the Liberty-Caution spectrum.

Over such matters it is, I think, unrealistic to assume that your would-be partner will change. Often the factors that place a Christian either in the Life-affirming or Life-denying streams are strong, deep, of long-standing and are not easily changed.

3. ROMAN CATHOLIC WITH NON ROMAN CATHOLIC

The differences here are more obvious than between the life-affirming and life-denying Christians but, in my opinion, probably not as deep!

Christians who are called to such a mixed-marriage bear the pain of the disunity of the Church permanently in their lives, and in doing so hasten the time when Jesus’s Prayer *that they may be one* is fully answered. I believe it is costly and a special calling, but, if a true ‘calling’, i.e. chosen and willed by God, then it will not be without his grace to carry burdens others do not share.

Part IV – And Now...

What I want further to share with you I have expressed in a short prayer-form which you can easily adapt to suit your situation.

Dear Lord,

I thank you that you have chosen me before my birth, and for all the wonderful gifts there are in being a person.

I thank you for the things I rarely notice or think about: my memory, my past, my body and my mind. For the ability to enjoy the present and plan for the future.

Take all my inner urges and longings, whatever they are, and whether I understand them or not. Fashion me to be a true soldier and servant in your Kingdom.

Take my life and its decisions to bring me most fully into your perfect will and purposes for me.

Show me whether you want me to marry, to stay single, or whether it is a question you want me to keep on ‘hold’ for a while.

I thank you for the challenge, but peace, of doing your will.

Give me your peace. Open my ears to what you are saying and my heart to your will.

If you have a partner for me, I pray for him/her as I pray for myself, that we may be willing to be led by you into the good things that you have prepared for those who love you. If you have not, give me a peace free of human pressures and the freedom to enjoy your rich and various callings.

I ask this, through Jesus Christ my Lord, my King and my God.

Amen