

# 1 A Biblical Perspective of Marriage

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*SHE WAS THE "BABY GIRL" raised in a loving, nurturing family. He was the fifth of nine children raised in a stern, unchristian home. She was from the city. He was from the country. She was pampered and cherished. He labored in the fields and struggled for everything he had. She was well educated. He had little opportunity for education beyond high school. She loved classical music. He loved country western.*

*They met and got married. She was 19. He was 25. She expected roses and romance. He expected home-cooked meals and compliance.*

*Statistics would say there is not much hope for this marriage. But both loved God and looked to the Bible for guidance.*

The Bible does not have a special section entitled "Biblical Principles for Marriage," so discovering the biblical principles for marriage is not as easy as sitting down and reading the Bible through. In fact, we discover the biblical teachings on marriage as we read through its pages, often hearing the teaching as the background music when the author is talking about other issues. As we read together, let's listen to the more prominent chords in this important background music.

## THE OLD TESTAMENT TEACHING ON MARRIAGE

The Old Testament reveals a significant part of its vision of marriage in the opening chapters of Genesis. Some have stated that, more than any other human institution, marriage goes back to the very activity of God in Creation. But before we

proceed, let's look at a general outline of how we will approach Genesis.

Genesis 1: The Relationship of Male and Female

Genesis 2: The Question of Marriage

Genesis 3: Sin and Marriage

## Genesis 1

Genesis 1 describes human creation as an extension of the very nature of God. The narrator of the first chapter of the Bible tells us that God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness" (Gen. 1:26).<sup>1</sup> The word "humankind" often translated "man" is *adam* in Hebrew. The Hebrew word *adam* means either a human being or humankind. *Adam* is not used to differentiate male from female, though it is often used in Hebrew culture to refer to a male.

The first statement about humankind found in Scripture is that we are created in the image of God. While there is speculation about what "created in the image of God" means, it is at the least a clear affirmation of human worth. That worth applies to any human being, male or female.

In Gen. 1:26 God proposes the creation of humankind. In verse 27 we read, "And God created the human being in his image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them." While not yet describing the marriage relationship, this verse clearly differentiates between the genders, male and female, and reveals that they are bound together in a special way. This biblical proclamation underscores that male and female are both fully and equally human. It also states that both male and female participate equally in the image of God. One is not created more in God's image than the other. This is not a bad truth to remember when we are arguing with our spouses about the common gender traits that frustrate us.

Let's explore this important lesson a bit further by looking at a few important verses of Scripture. Verses 28-29 preserve

and develop that unity and uniqueness of the male and female through the use of plural pronouns. Verse 28 begins with the comment “God blessed *them* and said to *them*.” Notice that it is male and female, together, who receive God’s blessing and command.

Next we read the command, “Be fruitful and become numerous and fill up the earth and control it. Manage the fish of the sea and the birds of the air.” Notice that this command is also directed to both male and female. Both male and female are commanded to be partners in fulfilling God’s command. Clearly, God is speaking of marriage when He commands the male and female to become fruitful and numerous and fill up the earth. This command to produce offspring includes the command to become good stewards of creation. God’s earth and resources are to be cared for with the knowledge that they are His, on loan to the couple. Once again, these commands are given to the male and female equally and together. This command is to each of them personally and to them as a united couple. No one can avoid responsibility for stewardship. Each must fulfill his or her stewardship personally.

According to Gen. 1, both husband and wife together are to be obedient to God. It also envisions a sexual relationship that has children as its outcome. However, children are not the ultimate goal of the marriage. According to the scripture, children are a means by which the male and female extend their stewardship of Creation to all that God has made.

Interesting enough, there is no hint of a hierarchy between the male and female in Gen. 1. Together, male and female are to exercise control or dominion (or even lordship) over the created order.

## **Genesis 2**

The creation account of Gen. 2 provides a more specific picture of God’s vision for marriage. The plot of chapter 2

moves toward the creation of woman and the vision of a “one flesh” relationship that will become the New Testament model of marriage. Most traditional English translations obscure the development of this plot by confusion between the word “man” meaning *human* and the word “male.” You will see what I mean as we look at this passage more closely as it is translated from the Hebrew text. Note especially the italicized words.

Gen. 2:5 states that “there was no human being [*adam*] to work the ground. Then verse 7 declares that “The LORD God fashioned the human [*adam*] of dust from the ground and breathed the breath of life into the nostrils of the human [*adam*], and the human became a living being.”

After describing the Garden that God had created, Gen. 2:15 states that the Lord God put the human (*adam*) in the Garden of Eden to do the work of caring for it. Verse 16 notes that the Lord God commanded the human (*adam*) to not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A key step in the plot comes in Gen. 2:18 when the Lord God said, “It is not good for the human (*adam*) to be alone. I will make a helper corresponding to the human (*adam*).”

To this point there has been no mention of male or female. It is the human being who is created from the ground and given the task of caring for the ground. It is the human being who should not be alone and for whom God will make a corresponding helper. It is not the male who is alone and needs a helper or the female who is alone and needs a helper. It is the human person—any human person—who is alone and needs a helper. And God promises to make such a helper for the lonely and needy human being.

The promised “helper” is described by the Hebrew word *'ezer*. This helper is no secondary or inferior being to come alongside the male to provide support. This is made clear when we look at other passages that use this same word. For example, the Psalms repeatedly name God himself as the helper (*'ezer*) of

His people. The 'ezer is a powerful and strong helper who supports and supplies what the other needs.

The fact that the Lord God commits himself to making this helper shows that God recognizes that He himself is not the needed helper. The helper God will provide will be one "corresponding to" the human. One could also translate the phrase "corresponding to" as "parallel to." God will provide a helper parallel to, or on the same level as, the lonely and needy human being. As of yet, neither the word "male" nor "female" has appeared in Gen. 2, and there is no hierarchy of gender mentioned.

In Gen. 2:19-24 we read about the search for this helper. The human (*adam*) is not God's only creation from the ground (*adamah*); all the animals of the field and the birds of the air are also formed from the ground. So the Lord God brings all the animals to the human (*adam*) for the human to name them. Three times Gen. 2:19-20 speaks of the human naming the animals. In the culture of the ancient Semites, naming was an act of domination or subjugating. The narrator concludes in verse 20 that "no helper corresponding to the human was found for the human." Not only are the animals not suitable as a corresponding helper to the human, but also they are clearly inferior to the human who has named them.

This story is nearing its climax. According to verse 21, the Lord God placed the human (*adam*) in a divinely induced sleep and took from the side (or rib) of the human and closed up the flesh. God then built from the side (or rib) of the human a woman (*isha*) and brought her to the man (*adam*), according to verse 22. It is not until this point of the plot that the different genders are mentioned. Let's look at the some of the dialog.

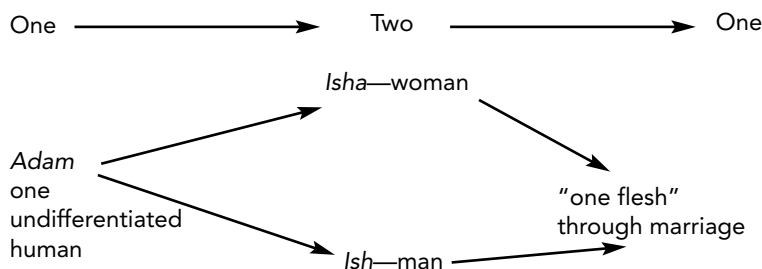
The man (*adam*) responds in verse 23 to the woman with recognition and affirmation that they belong to each other: "At last! This is bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh. She will be

called woman [*isha*] because she was taken from man [*ish*].” Verse 23 is a loud affirmation that God’s helper is custom-made for fellowship with the man.

The scripture then concludes in Gen. 2:24 with the statement that the man (*ish*) will leave father and mother and unite himself with his woman (*isha*) and that they will become one flesh. The obvious conclusion is that marriage is the purpose of God’s creation of male and female. The Hebrew word usually translated “join” or “unite” or “cling to” in verse 24 is used in the Old Testament of tying objects together, of buckling a belt, of close associations, and of continuing relationships. It implies both the closeness and the permanence of the relationship.

Verse 24 also states some of the most memorable words describing the biblical view of marriage: “They will become one flesh.” Part of the meaning of becoming one flesh refers to sexual union and the children who are the result. But no Hebrew person of the biblical period would have limited the one-flesh vision to simply physical or sexual union. Flesh represented the whole person with physical, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual dimensions.

To become one flesh, in a biblical way, speaks of a couple coming together in all the dimensions of life to complement each other so that together they are a stronger whole than either of them is individually. To become one flesh does not mean that each partner contributes equally in every dimension of life.



Rather, each partner gives himself or herself completely to the marriage and has made the marriage more important than any other human relationship (such as that of father and mother).

Becoming one flesh brings back together the man (*ish*) and the woman (*isha*) who was differentiated by God in the creation of the woman. Thus Gen. 1—2 paints a picture of human creation that simply begins with the human being (*adam*) whom God differentiates into woman (*isha*) and man (*ish*) and then reunites into one flesh, the marriage couple. Without devaluing or dehumanizing persons who are single either by or against their own choice, Genesis portrays what it means to be human as a movement from one to two to one.

To be fully human in the Hebrew mind is to be both sexually differentiated as a male or female and to be united via marriage. This unity of male and female in marriage contains all God designed humanity to be. The statement of Gen. 2:18 stands, “It is not good for a human to be alone.” Marriage provides the most common and hoped for means by which God’s vision of persons becoming fully human can be fulfilled.<sup>2</sup>

The final statement of Gen. 2 is also important for understanding God’s vision for marriage. Verse 25 concludes the chapter with the comment “The two of them were naked, the human [*adam*] and his woman [*isha*], and they experienced no shame.” Given the normal Old Testament concerns for nudity and shame, this is a dramatic statement of vulnerability and trust. This verse envisions a marriage characterized by complete openness and trust. Such a relationship can never be one-sided. It is the picture of both partners placing themselves—emotionally, spiritually, physically, and intellectually—in the hands of the other in the confidence that they will not be betrayed or hurt.

### **Genesis 3**

Gen. 3 reveals that the fall turned God’s vision of marriage upside down. The immediate result of the first couple’s disobe-

dience of God's one command is awareness of their nakedness and shame (vv. 7, 10). Disobedience destroyed the mutual vulnerability and trust that had been the climax of God's creation of marriage. The sense of mutuality and partnership that was so central to God's vision for marriage is lost. The consequence of disobedience specifically for the woman would be pain in childbearing (v. 16). Thus the most intimate expression of one flesh—sexual union—would lead to pain because of sin.

Further, the woman's man (*ish*) would rule or have dominion over her. Another result of sin is the loss of mutuality and a complementary relationship. In its place come domination, hierarchy, and the struggle for power. The scripture illustrates this truth in Gen. 3:20, though one must understand the culture to recognize the significance of his comment. "The man [*adam*] called the name of his woman [*isha*] Eve." In ancient Semitic culture, naming another was an act of domination or power, claiming the authority to define and determine the fate of the one named. Remember that the man had not named the woman prior to the fall. Naming her was the first act of subjugating her.

Gen. 3 also marks the transition from God's vision of marriage to descriptions of marriages in the Old Testament. It is at this point that we must consider what will determine our vision of marriage. Will we choose to make the results of the fall—marriages characterized by hierarchy, conflict, power struggles, lack of vulnerability and intimacy, and domination—the goal toward which we strive in our marriages? Or will we choose the vision of marriage characterized by love, companionship, trust, intimacy, mutuality, for which God created human beings as our vision and goal? Surely people who believe that God's sanctifying power can renew the divine image within us cannot be satisfied with a vision of marriage determined by sin and the fall.

As people who believe in God's transforming and sanctify-



ing power, we must live above the sociological, psychological, and cultural expectations of marriage. Regardless of what our culture teaches us about marriage, holy people stand under the call of God. We are to live out our marriages in mutuality, complementing each other's strengths and weaknesses, being both vulnerable and trusting, discovering safety, and reverently receiving the gifts of intimacy.

## **Marriage Covenant**

One should not suppose that a vision of marriage disappears from the Old Testament with Gen. 3. There are examples of marriages in which we can catch a glimpse of couples aspiring toward God's vision of marriage. There are moments in which the marriages of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, and Ruth and Boaz reflect God's vision of marriage. But unfortunately more often than not we discover the pull of sin and a fallen culture turning marriages into mere contracts and destructive struggles for power. That is no doubt why early in the Hebrew culture it became necessary to develop laws for divorce to keep married people from completely destroying each other.

Though hints are present in Gen. 2, it is not until we arrive at the final book of the Old Testament that we find marriage described as a covenant. The Hebrew text of Malachi 2:14, 16, is difficult to understand, but the underlying assumption of marriage as a covenant is clear.

So what is a covenant? The biblical concept of covenant is a way of describing a relationship. The covenant most often mentioned in the Old Testament is the Sinai covenant between God and Israel. This covenant described the relationship of God and Israel in terms of their shared story (or history), their shared expectations, and the consequences that would come if the expectations were not met. These characteristics of the Sinai covenant also apply to a marriage covenant.

## Shared Story

The covenant established between God and Israel on Mt. Sinai began by the reviewing of their shared story (summarized in Exod. 20:2) and by God's declaration that He is the one who brought Israel out of Egypt. Just as the historical events that brought God and Israel together to establish a covenant, a marriage covenant is built on the memories of shared stories. Many modern counselors advise persons to strengthen their marriages by reviewing and reenacting the events that brought the couple together.

## Mutual Expectations

The Ten Commandments, as well as the many statutes and ordinances found in Exod. 20—23, constitute the expectations that defined the covenant relationship between God and Israel. The Old Testament often summarized those expectations with the words of God "I will be your God, and you will be my people." This statement reveals the mutuality of the covenant agreement. Israel, as God's people, was to fulfill a set of expectations. And God, as Israel's divine ruler, was to fulfill a set of expectations to Israel. In similar fashion, the marriage covenant is built around mutual expectations. When the expectations become one-sided, the covenant is threatened.

## Consequences

The covenant between God and Israel included a section sometimes described as "blessings and curses" (example: Deut. 27—28) and points out the consequences of keeping or breaking covenant. Just as the Sinai covenant had consequences, so does the marriage covenant. In fact, the point of Mal. 2:10-16 is that breaking faith in one's marriage covenant has the consequence of undermining Israel's worship. Failure to maintain mutuality and vulnerability in marriage has negative spiritual consequences in terms of one's ability to relate intimately to God.

Whether you get your vision of marriage by looking at creation or the covenant contract, the Old Testament presents a high view of marriage. And fidelity, mutuality, intimacy, trust, and vulnerability are the key elements in this vision of marriage. One could easily conclude this biblical vision of marriage is too high, that it is impossible for normal human beings living in a sinful world to be in such a relationship. However, before we jump to such a conclusion, first acknowledge that this view of marriage is based upon couples who are obedient to God and who exercise a great deal of grace toward each other. These two factors are essential and crucial.

## THE NEW TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE ON MARRIAGE

The New Testament teachings on marriage are grounded firmly in the Old Testament. Four times Gen. 2:24 is quoted in the New Testament—twice by Jesus in the Gospels and twice by Paul in his letters. Other than 1 Pet. 3:1-7, all the explicit teachings on marriage in the New Testament are in the gospel passages by Jesus and letter passages from Paul. Jesus' teachings on marriage come in the context of discussions of divorce thrust upon Him by adversaries or enemies.

Divorce was a hot topic during Jesus' time. As a result, people asked about His position on divorce on a number of occasions. Jesus' answers to these questions appear in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. Unfortunately, no one asked Jesus about what constituted a good marriage.

Matt. 19:3-12 and Mark 10:2-12 appear to be describing the same event, though the two gospels do not record the conversation in exactly the same way. Both gospels begin with a question from the Pharisees designed to "test" Jesus. The question was "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" Matt. 19:3 adds the words "for any and every reason." The context of the question was the ongoing debate between two rival schools of the Pharisees on the subject of divorce. Both groups appealed

to Deut. 24:1-4, which speaks of a husband giving his wife a certificate of divorce when she finds no favor (or grace) in his eyes because there is some “indecent matter” regarding her. The two groups or schools, Hillel and Shammai, debated what that “indecent matter” might be.

The school of Shammai considered the indecent matter to be sexual or marital infidelity. The school of Hillel took a much broader view of the issue and interpreted it to be as simple as poor cooking, housekeeping, or the lack of attractiveness. Clearly the school of Hillel had a very low view of marriage, trivializing it to the point that a man who saw a more attractive woman than his wife was permitted to divorce his wife to marry the other, more attractive, woman.

When Jesus was asked about the reasons a man could divorce his wife, He turned the focus from Deut. 24 back to Gen. 1—2. His response is recorded in Matt. 19:4, where He recites Gen. 1:27—God created male and female. He then quotes Gen. 2:24, which calls on a man to leave father and mother, be joined to his wife, and that the two will become one flesh. Jesus then comments, “As a result they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has yoked together mankind must not separate” (Matt. 19:6).

Jesus reaffirms the vision for marriage first given in Genesis and describes marriage as the yoking together of the husband and wife by God. The image of God yoking the husband and wife together is instructive. First, this illustration eliminates any sense of hierarchy in the marriage. Two oxen are yoked side by side. They work parallel to each other and in step with each other. Second, there is a hierarchy and subjugation (to God). The married couple is to be subject to God as the one who places the yoke of marriage upon them. Lest we think this imagery portrays marriage as a terrible burden (yoke), the Jews of Jesus’ time spoke of the covenant as a yoke. And Jesus described discipleship as taking his yoke (Matt. 11:28-30). There-

fore, Jesus views marriage as a mutual and complementary relationship in which both partners are subject to God.

Jesus also states that persons must not separate what God has joined together. The Greek grammar is stronger than most English translations of Matt. 19:6 imply. We could say that Jesus declared that it was imperative that people not separate what God has yoked together. In simple and direct terms, Jesus was teaching the indissolubility of marriage.

Jesus' teaching is appealing to happily married people. Persons who are unhappily married or who have a low view of marriage find the idea of an indissoluble marriage harsh and restrictive. The Pharisees speak from such a perspective with their question in Matt. 19:7. Jesus' reply is important. He states that Moses permitted divorce because of the hardness of human hearts but that divorce was never God's intention for marriage.

It is important to recognize what Jesus is doing in this passage. He does not prohibit divorce; rather, He names it for what it is—a failure to achieve God's intention for marriage because of human sinfulness and brokenness. In this way Jesus affirms an extremely high view of marriage but acknowledges that human beings may sometimes find themselves in circumstances where that high view of marriage cannot be realized because of sin and brokenness.

This teaching corresponds with people's experience. No emotionally healthy person celebrates divorce, but sometimes such a person recognizes that because of sin and human brokenness divorce is the less evil of two choices—neither of which was God's or the person's original intention.<sup>3</sup>

## **The Apostle Paul's Teachings on Marriage**

Paul's teaching on marriage appears in most concentrated form in 1 Cor. 7 and Eph. 5:22-31. Both passages are complex and have generated as much confusion as help. They are part of the reason many people question Paul's view of marriage.

First Cor. 7:1 contains the provocative statement “It is good for a man to not touch a woman.” This would certainly suggest a low view of marriage on Paul’s part. However, verse 1 begins with the words “Now concerning the things about which you wrote.” These words begin a section extending at least through 1 Cor. 14, in which the apostle responds to issues raised by the Corinthians in a letter sent to him. It is most likely that the words “It is good for a man to not touch a woman” are a quotation from the Corinthian letter, because Paul’s words in the following verses portray a different view of marriage.

The apostle’s response in verse 2 is that each man should have his own wife and each woman should have her own husband. The reason for this is for the prevention of sexual immorality.<sup>4</sup> Verse 3 declares that each husband must meet his obligation to his wife and that each wife must meet her obligation to her husband. The reason for this is stated in verse 4: “The wife does not have authority over her own body, but her husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but his wife does.”

The immediate context suggests that the obligation spouses owe each other is a sexual relationship. However, the larger context suggests that the obligation includes all that comes under the vision of marriage presented in Gen. 2. A husband owes his wife all his physical, sexual, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual abilities, and the wife owes her husband all her physical, sexual, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual abilities. Especially surprising in verses 3-4 is the complete mutuality of this obligation between husbands and wives. Given the customs of Jewish culture and the practices of Greek and Roman society, Paul’s words requiring complete mutuality are astounding.

The apostle appears to be addressing individuals at Corinth who regarded sexual activity, even within marriage, as degrading or unspiritual. Paul was concerned that married persons

who take such an approach would place inappropriate sexual pressure on their spouses. Therefore, he forbids married believers to deprive their spouses of sexual relations even for the purpose of prayer (verse 5) except for short periods of time and by mutual consent.

Several times in chapter 7 Paul recommends singleness and celibacy for those who are able (gifted). The purpose of such a decision is to increase one's dedication to ministry. First Cor. 7:29-35 states that married persons have obligations to their spouses and families. Single persons are free to devote themselves to evangelism without distraction. Paul believed singleness was a good choice in light of his confidence that "the time has become shortened."

Paul believed the Second Coming was imminent, so he believed that singleness was a more efficient way to prepare for Christ's return than marriage. We can grant the correctness of Paul's logic while admitting that his assumption about the timing of the Second Coming was clearly wrong.

In 1 Cor. 7:10-11 Paul forbids divorce between believing spouses. He also counters the arguments of Corinthians who recommended that Christians divorce unbelieving spouses. Paul states in verses 12-13 that the believing spouse must remain with an unbelieving spouse as long as the unbelieving spouse is willing to remain in the relationship.

Verse 14 provides an amazing argument. The unbelieving spouse is sanctified by the believing spouse. Paul believed that by living together in marriage, holiness could flow from a believer to an unbeliever! He viewed the believing spouse as God's agent, embodying holiness, incarnating Christ, and helping to bring salvation to the unbeliever. Many of us have witnessed how the contagious and attractive life of a believing spouse has been effective in bringing the unbelieving mate to Christ.<sup>5</sup>

## Taking a Closer Look at Paul's Teaching on Marriage

The highest view of marriage from Paul appears in Eph. 5:22-33. This scripture has often been used to demonstrate that wives should be subject to husbands. However, careful reading of the Greek text raises significant questions about this view. Let's see if we can walk through this together.

Modern English translations are consistent in placing an imperative such as "submit" or "be subject" or "submit yourselves" or "be subordinate" or "yield" in verse 22, directing wives to submit to their husbands. However, it comes as quite a surprise to discover that there is no such verb in the Greek text. That's right—there is no verb at all in the Greek text! The reason translators supply a verb such as "submit" in verse 22 is that the preceding verse uses it.

Verse 21 speaks of "submitting to one another in the fear of Christ." However, the submission described there is a mutual submission and not the submission of one gender to another. Paul's treatment of marriage immediately follows his teaching about mutual submission and the Spirit-filled life. This implies that Paul views marriage as an arena in which mutual submission is lived out.<sup>6</sup>

Paul's statement in verse 23 that the husband is head of the wife as Christ is head of the Church surely does not imply that the husband is authorized to dominate his wife.<sup>7</sup> Christ does not behave that way toward the Church; He loves and serves the Church. That love was characterized by Christ giving himself for the Church, sanctifying it, purifying it, dying for it. Christ's goal was to present the Church as glorious, without spot or wrinkle or any defect, but as holy and blameless.

Verse 28 brings us back to the subject at hand: "Thus, in this way husbands ought to love their own wives as they love their own bodies." First, this passage calls on husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the Church. Second, this verse



points us back to Gen. 2 and the story of the creation of woman. To love one's wife is to love one's own body, because woman was created out of the side (or rib) of man and in marriage the two become one flesh.

The example of Christ and the Church and the relationship of husbands and wives are intertwined in verse 29. Paul writes, "No man ever hated his own flesh but nourishes and cherishes it." At one level this simply means that no normal man hates himself or destroys his own body. Rather, he takes care of himself and has healthy self-respect and even pride. At a second level of meaning, if the husband and wife become one flesh in marriage as Gen. 2:24 states, then a man cannot be hateful or destructive toward his wife, because she is his own flesh. He must nourish and cherish her as he would himself, because they are one flesh.

Some people have noticed that in this passage of Scripture Paul so intertwines the subject of Christ and the Church and the relationship of husbands and wives that we might wonder if he has lost track of the main subject. And that may be the significant point he is making—that the best example of how Christ relates to the church is found in a godly marriage.

So how do we understand and apply this passage in our culture, a culture vastly different from that to which Paul originally wrote? The cultural expectation of the first century was that wives would submit to their husbands and that husbands would use their wives for their own sexual and social gratification. In that context Paul could assume that wives were submissive and that the husbands were the ones in need of major instruction. However, the point of the whole paragraph is to show how marriage can be an example, an expression of the mutual submission demonstrated by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church.

Surely the application is not that one gender is to submit and one gender is to love. Rather, the application is that our

marriages are to be an example of the relationship that exists between Christ and the Church. Both parties are to love and submit. To those who argue that “somebody has to be in charge of the home” Paul might well respond, “Yes, Christ must be in charge of the home.” And if Christ is Lord of the home, then mutual submission and mutual love are possible and ultimately inevitable.

## CONCLUSION

We sometimes forget that the Bible was written in a particular culture and time in history quite different from our own. The culturally embedded nature of the Bible means that its principles and visions are cast in terms best understood in that time and place. To move from quoting the Bible to appropriately applying it to contemporary culture will always be a challenge.

Actually, when we consider the world in which the Bible was written, the character of its vision of marriage is amazing. How could such a lofty vision of marriage come from a time in which marriages were so harsh? Surely, the picture of marriage found in the Bible is testimony to the Scriptures’ inspiration by the Holy Spirit.

Ultimately, at the heart of the biblical view of marriage is Gen. 2:24. Its message is timeless: a person must leave father and mother and be joined together with his or her spouse so that they become one flesh. This union is to result in each spouse nourishing and cherishing the other with the holiness and well-being of the other being a first concern.

Surely a marriage built on this biblical view would be delightful and fulfilling. The real question is whether it is possible. And the answer to that question depends on one’s confidence in the grace of God to transform human lives. John Wesley often claimed that God does not command what His grace does not enable. God’s grace is sufficient even to enable the kind of marriage envisioned in Scripture.

Remember our beginning illustration?

*She was the "baby girl" raised in a loving, nurturing Christian family. He was the fifth of nine children raised in a stern, unchristian home until he was 12. She was from the city. He was from the country. She was pampered and cherished. He labored in the fields and struggled for everything he had. She was well educated. He had little opportunity for education beyond high school. She loved classical music. He loved country western.*

*They met at church. She was a Christian. He was a Christian. She fell in love with this handsome, young man with the Southern drawl. He fell in love with this cute little naïve girl he called, "Angel Girl." They got married. She was 19. He was 25. She expected roses and romance. He expected home-cooked meals and compliance.*

*Statistics would say there is not much hope for this marriage.*

This couple would say, "If not for our vow to follow Christ and our commitment to place Jesus as Lord of our relationship, the statistics would be right." This Christian couple celebrated their 40th anniversary in 2006.

God makes all things possible!

## Endnotes

1. All translation of individual Scripture passages is by the author.
2. Single persons, regardless of the cause of their singleness, also need a means by which to become significantly, nonsexually, connected to another person.
3. The account found in Mark 10:2-12 proceeds in the opposite order. The subject of Moses' allowance of divorce and Deut. 24 come up first, and afterward Jesus proceeds to teach God's original intention for marriage from Gen. 1 and 2. The two gospels give the same content but in a different order. The order in Mark makes it clear that Jesus gives priority to the teaching of Genesis over that of Deuteronomy. In the biblical world, that which was older was considered to be more valuable or more important. Thus the theological vision of Gen. 1—2 is more important and more binding than the provisions of Deut. 24, which came later to provide a way of dealing with the results of human sinfulness.
4. The word for sexual immorality, *porneia*, is plural. Apparently Paul believed the many instances of sexual immorality suggest that persons should be married.

5. While some of Paul's thoughts on marriage in 1 Cor. 7 seem utilitarian or simply pragmatic, here we see that he believed that marriage can be evangelistic.

6. The first example Paul uses to illustrate the meaning of submission is that of a wife to her husband, introduced in verse 22. Though there is no verb in the Greek text, the verb "submit" is clearly implied. What is not implied is that it should be understood as an imperative or a command. Rather, the flow of thought suggests that it should be understood as a simple indicative, a statement of fact. This submission was culturally assumed in Paul's time. So instead of Paul being interpreted as demanding that wives submit to husbands, the Greek text reads that the submission of wives given to husbands is an example of the way all Christians submit to each other.

7. The concept of "head" in biblical thought more often refers to the source of something rather than to authority over someone. Therefore, verse 23 reminds readers of the creation of woman in Gen. 2, in which the man was the source from which woman was created. Likewise, Christ is the source from which the Church flows. The first imperative in this passage comes in verse 25 with the command for husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the Church. The submission of wives to husbands practiced in the culture of that time provides an example of the mutual submission that shows we are filled with the Holy Spirit. However, the treatment of wives by husbands in that time fell short. So Paul had to command husbands to demonstrate their mutual submission by loving their wives with the kind of love Christ demonstrated for the Church.

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