

Marriage— a Scriptural Perspective

*“Wherefore they
are no more twain,
but one flesh. What
therefore God hath
joined together,
let not man put
asunder.”*

—Matthew 19:6

The marriage institution

was ordained by God in Eden prior to the entrance of sin into the world. It was established to populate the earth, perpetuate the human family, transmit values conducive to the preservation of social order

as well as happiness, and to provide for companionship, intimacy, and appropriate affection between man and woman. When the divine principles controlling marriage are observed, this relationship is a great blessing; if they are disregarded, much sorrow and vexation are certain to follow.

In the Old Testament, marriage is frequently used to symbolize the relationship existing between God and his chosen people Israel. We read for example, “Thy Maker is thine husband; the LORD of hosts is his name; and thy Redeemer the Holy One of

Israel; the God of the whole earth shall he be called.” (Isa. 54:5) As a symbolic wife, Israel was promised untold blessings by God. These would ultimately result in that nation becoming the spiritual seed of Abraham and a kingdom of priests if she remained obedient. (Exod. 19:5,6) Israel, however, did not remain loyal to Jehovah. History records the fulfillment of her punishments for disobedience and her subsequent destiny as foretold in the Bible.—Lev. 26:17-46; Matt. 23:37-39

In preparation for the Israelites' entrance into the land of promise, God's commands to his chosen people through Moses read, “Neither shalt thou make marriages with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son. ... For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth.” (Deut. 7:3-6) Thus, we see another aspect of marriage, that of compatibility, articulated in this passage. Such attributes as truth, righteousness, reverence for the Creator, and purity, which were inherent in the first pair prior to their fall into sin would not be fostered by the Israelites' union in marriage to heathen people. God admonished them to keep separate from idolaters.

God's dealings with Israel in many respects prefigure the instructions he has provided to the church. (I Cor. 10:11; Rom. 15:4) Just as Israel had to meet various requirements under the Law Covenant arrangement, so spirit-begotten believers of this age must fulfill their covenant obligations to the Heavenly Father.—Ps. 50:5

An attitude of mind which the consecrated should embody is reflected in these words from the Master: "Anyone who wants to be my follower must love me far more than he does his own father, mother, wife, children, brothers, or sisters—yes, more than his own life—otherwise he cannot be my disciple. And no one can be my disciple who does not carry his own cross and follow me."—Luke 14:26,27, *The Living Bible*

The First Obligation

As footstep followers of Christ, whether already married or contemplating marriage, our first obligation is to do the will of our Heavenly Father and follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Faithfulness on our part will require that we seek to apply scriptural principles which are pertinent to the state of marriage and all other temporal matters in our lives. The married state was given the highest of endorsements when Jesus performed his first miracle by turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana. (John 2:1-11) The Apostle Paul acknowledged the propriety of the marriage relationship when he wrote, "marriage is honorable in all."—Heb. 13:4

The decision to marry or not to marry is a personal one. Notwithstanding the satisfaction and mutual joy which occurs when serving the Lord with a mate, some of the Lord's dear ones, when studying Paul's words as well as other passages of Scripture, may come to the conclusion that for them, it would be to their best advantage in serving the Lord to maintain themselves in the single state.—I Cor. 7:24-38

Each individual believer, however, should seek to determine the Lord's will with regard to the advisability of entering into the marriage relationship. One should commit the matter to the Heavenly Father in prayer, meditating upon the scriptural testimony concerning marriage, observing and seeking counsel from brethren who have chosen to marry, and then carefully considering God's overruling providence. If one's consecrated judgment seems to indicate it would be a blessing and a spiritual enhancement to continue serving the Lord within the bonds of matrimony, additional factors should be considered in selecting a mate with whom to spend the remainder of one's consecrated life.

Being Yoked Properly

One important concern would be these words from Paul: "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?" (II Cor. 6:14) This text counsels the Lord's people to be separate from the aims, ambitions, and spirit of the world, as well as fundamentally erroneous doctrines and practices, regardless of religious origin. This point is further amplified later in the chapter when the apostle writes: "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you."—II Cor. 6:17

The matter of choosing to be unequally yoked at the start of a marriage relationship is quite different from being unequally yoked by virtue of having become a New Creature in Christ after

marriage occurs. We further note that the word “unbelievers” in the foregoing verse 14 is translated from a Greek word which, according to *Strong’s Greek Dictionary*, means: “actively disbelieving, without Christian faith, a heathen.” From this definition we may understand that the phrase “unequally yoked” would not necessarily apply to a consecrated believer choosing to marry another believer who is unconsecrated, yet supportive of his or her spouse’s standing with the Lord. In such cases, the word “unbelievers,” as defined, would not fit properly.

The Apostle Paul’s additional reference about marrying “only in the Lord” has been viewed by some as a commandment and by others as a suggestion. (I Cor. 7:39) Indeed, Paul himself stated at the beginning of his discussion of this subject in verse 25, “I have no commandment of the Lord: yet I give my judgment.” Thus, all the consecrated should exercise great care, not only when making their own decisions concerning marriage, but also to avoid judging the decisions made by others.—Matt. 7:1,2

Seeking the Ideal Mate

We are surely living in stressful times. For those who desire to enter into marriage, it is often difficult to find a seemingly ideal mate. Certainly, none of us is perfect. If a desired spouse must fit certain detailed specifications, such an individual may prove to be non-existent. This may eventually lead to a lowering of expectations.

One should be very reluctant to enter into a union of marriage based mainly upon mutual physical

attraction before considering other matters. Is there compatibility spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually? Is each motivated by a desire to give to the other rather than merely receiving? Do each have a similarity of overall goals and outlook with regard to handling everyday practical matters? Believers who enter into marriage should also recognize that their relationship prefigures the future relationship between Christ and the glorified church. (II Cor. 11:2; Rev. 19:7,8; 21:2) Therefore, there are certain principles outlined in the Scriptures which should guide an earthly union.

The Bible teaches that in the relationship between the sexes, headship resides in the man: "I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God." (I Cor. 11:3) Properly understood, this headship in no way implies oppression or cruelty of any kind. In fact, if we look at Christ in his relationship to the church, we see that Jesus epitomizes love, care, and helpfulness with regard to the interests of his bride.—John 15:9-12; II Thess. 2:16

As an evidence of our Master's loving concern for the church, a portion of the prayer which he uttered to God on the night prior to his crucifixion reads: "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me."—John 17:20,21

As footstep followers of Jesus, we must manifest, both within and outside the marriage arrangement,

our great reverence for God, a supreme desire to be obedient to his will, loving appreciation for the magnificent sacrifice of Christ, and daily striving to be conformed to his image. Thus, given the Holy Spirit's influence in our lives, we should hearken to the instructions furnished in the Scriptures as we seek to attain this oneness of love, purpose, spirit, and purity which the Master prayed would be evident in our lives.

Counsel from Apostle Paul

Ephesians chapter 5 contains another familiar passage of Scripture which applies to our subject: "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore, as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So, ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church."—Eph. 5:22-29

Note that wives should submit themselves to their husbands in the same manner as the church is to be subject to Christ. Our subjection to Jesus is a willing one and is inspired not by fear or force.

Rather, it is prompted by love, gratitude, supreme confidence, and trust that he will care for our every interest. With Christ, if we are properly exercised, our subjection will always result in blessings. As our Head, in every instance, all that he will do on our behalf is always for our highest good and best interest. (Rom. 8:28) In an earthly marriage, that is the ideal, but because of imperfection, such is not always the case. Therefore, the Apostle Paul gives the special admonition to husbands: "Let each one of you, individually, so love his own wife as himself, that even the wife may reverence her husband."—vs. 33, *The Emphatic Diaglott*

A husband's love, concern, faithfulness, and sacrificial attitude toward his wife should have the effect of having her manifest reverence and respect toward him which otherwise could not occur if he did not conduct himself along such lines as taught in the Scriptures. When Ephesians 5:24 speaks of submitting "in everything," the clear implication is in everything consistent with righteousness, Christian principles, and the spirit of what would be in harmony with the divine arrangement. In Acts 5:1-10 we have the account of Ananias and Sapphira. Since Sapphira acquiesced in her husband's evil plan to withhold some of the money from the land they sold, both were destroyed. Clearly, she should not have submitted to her husband's plan, nor been party to it.

The apostle's further counsel in Ephesians 5:25-29 makes it clear that the purpose of Christ's supervision of the church and of our submission to him is not designed to limit our spiritual or intellectual abilities, to degrade us, nor is it for

any selfish purposes. It is, rather, that we may be completely sanctified, made spotless and “without blemish.” Ideally, as the husband would care for his own body and all of its interests, he is to demonstrate the same concern for his wife. He should seek to provide for her needs, both spiritually and temporally, just as Christ nourishes, protects, counsels, and guides us in the way of holiness.

Sometimes difficulties arise when a wife has superior abilities in areas of the marital relationship. Quite often today, either by virtue of education or work experience, a wife may have much greater capabilities in terms of money management, arranging affairs in the home, or a better awareness of how to handle certain situations. In such cases there could be an inclination on her part to assume the place of headship. Such a course, if pursued, could prove detrimental to the marriage. To prevent serious difficulties, it would be wise upon her part to be extremely tactful. She could, perhaps, offer suggestions for her husband’s consideration in a kindly, appropriate manner. He may thus have greater insights and be built up, in addition to appreciating her talents as a helpmate, while still retaining his position according to the divine arrangement.

Mutual Support

As previously noted, some of the consecrated may be married to one who is unconsecrated. In many instances, unconsecrated spouses would be very supportive of their mate’s activities. Surely that is a blessing. If it is the husband who is consecrated,

by consideration of his wife's needs and his devotion to biblical principles, he will enjoy a happy union. By his example, his wife may subsequently accept the Lord, and both are then able to walk together in spiritual matters.

Similarly, if the wife is consecrated and her husband is a noble and caring individual, he will be supportive of her and appreciate her stand for righteousness. It may be that she will prove to be such a positive influence upon him that he, too, will ultimately come to dedicate his life to the Lord. However, even if that does not occur, although she could not compromise on matters of principle, recognizing the fact that her husband was respectful of and treated her in a kindly and loving manner, she would be obliged to exercise some moderation and to meet the demands of the marriage relationship. This would include providing her husband with a reasonable degree of companionship even if he did not participate in all of the spiritual activities with which she is involved.

When Severe Problems Occur

Considering the immense sense of joy and elation that is so apparent between a couple on their wedding day, it almost seems impossible to conceive that such a relationship could deteriorate to the point where the love which once existed is no longer evident. The Apostle Paul addressed such circumstances when he wrote: "Unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife.

But to the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy. But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace.”—I Cor. 7:10-15

Even in a very difficult marriage, to the extent possible, the consecrated husband is to perform his duties carefully even while he patiently endures this trial. The above verses point out that he should put his trust in God that the sanctifying effect of his spiritual life will at least be a testimony to his wife and children. In similar fashion, the consecrated wife also is to perform her wifely responsibilities in the spirit of meekness, patience, and respect to the extent that she can endure the situation, trusting to God for promised grace and by example, also manifesting the sanctifying influence in the home and upon her children. Despite a believer’s best efforts to maintain the marriage, if the unbelieving husband or wife chooses to depart, it may well be that this is a providential overruling by the Heavenly Father.

Unbearable Oppression

It is unfortunate that in a marriage union, sometimes an impossible situation may develop for the believer. If the husband is a consecrated believer, his wife may become antagonistic toward his beliefs.

This could result in unreasonable actions, such as forbidding brethren to visit, destroying Truth literature, making it impossible for him to attend meetings, and even undermining his influence with their children. In such an instance where the believing husband could not exercise his proper role within the marital relationship, he would be justified in considering himself as being forsaken if all attempts at resolving their differences have failed. Such treatment would demonstrate that the concept of oneness had been broken, and he would be well advised to separate himself from that environment and live elsewhere.

There may be times, too, when the wife is the believer, and the unbelieving husband's treatment of her is unbearable. If he through hostility becomes dictatorial, abusive, and demonstrates a lack of love and a loss of respect through his treatment of her, the wife would have grounds for considering herself deserted. She should prayerfully look to God for his leadings and providences so that he may direct the issue for her highest spiritual welfare and to afford her relief, especially in a situation where children are involved. The Christian wife has an obligation to be respectful to her husband. However, depending on the severity of a situation, there may be circumstances where the spirit of a sound mind will indicate that the limits of endurance have been reached and a separation is necessary.

In all such cases where severe marriage difficulties may have arisen, the consecrated believer must take great care to be sure that he or she is acting within scriptural guidelines. Every effort should be made to rectify such circumstances to the mutual

benefit of both husband and wife, as well as children if such be involved, within the confines of Christian principles. Separation should only be considered as a very last resort, after all other methods have failed to resolve the situation. Above all, the guiding influence of God's Holy Spirit should be diligently sought in order that the Heavenly Father's will might be ascertained and decisions made in harmony with that will. Additionally, given the likelihood that all of the circumstances related to such matters are not known by others, and as previously noted, judgment is to be avoided.—Matt. 7:1,2

Conclusion

A consecrated child of God's first obligation is to strive to do the will of the Heavenly Father. Marriage is an institution divinely ordained, and when ordered along scriptural lines, it facilitates the spirit of oneness. Decisions related to marriage and the marriage arrangement are very personal, and often involve differing circumstances not known to all. Therefore, consecrated believers should avoid judging the decisions of others. Footstep followers of Christ who marry are advised to do so as to avoid the difficulties which often occur when believers are not properly matched. Since marriage is a picture of the union between Christ and the church, in our human marriages we should be guided by an application of scriptural principles that are manifested in this glorious spiritual arrangement. The hope of becoming a part of the Lamb's wife should serve to strengthen our resolve to be faithful in the doing of God's will, as revealed to us through his most precious and Holy Word. ■