

MARRIAGE

WHAT IS MARRIAGE?

1. Marriage is the joining of an unmarried man with an unmarried woman to form a home of their own.

Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. Genesis 2:24. “Thou shalt go unto my country, and to my kindred, and take a wife unto my son Isaac. . . . And they called Rebekah, and said unto her, Wilt thou go with this man? And she said, I will go. . . . And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah’s tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. Genesis 24:4, 58, 67.

Whatever else we may conclude from these

Scriptures, we can safely say that marriage is the joining of a man and woman in a lifelong bond. The man and woman leave the home of their father and mother and establish a home of their own.

2. Marriage is a covenant relationship for life.

Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave. Song of Solomon 8:6.

Yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant. Malachi 2:14.

For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. Romans 7:2.

Marriage is not only the joining of a man and woman, but it is also a covenant to be faithful in that union for life. There is a proper jealousy in marital love, an exclusiveness which says in effect, "The love which I give to you I will give to no other, and the love which you give to me, you must give to no other."

We might note here that while this exclusiveness is prescribed in the Bible, it is also to a certain extent

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inherent in marital love. There is an unwritten but very evident expectation of faithfulness in the love between a man and a woman. It is ironic that this generation which so sings the praises of love with no strings attached is also saturated with songs of heartache, betrayal, and disappointment and regularly hears the news of violence and murder due to the unfaithfulness of these “lovers.”

In light of the covenantal requirement in marriage, such variations as trial marriages or contract marriages, which place limitations on time or responsibilities, violate what the Bible teaches about marriage. These contracts form a cooperative relationship, but fall short of the lifetime oneness and commitment required in marriage. From a Biblical standpoint, therefore, a contract marriage would not be a true marriage, but rather, an illicit relationship.

3. Marriage begins with an event (a wedding) which marks for the couple and for observers a change from singleness to marriage.

And the third day there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee; and the mother of Jesus was there: And both Jesus was called, and his disciples, to the marriage. John 2:1, 2.

We have seen that marriage is the joining of a man and woman and that it includes a lifelong commitment. Now we are noting what at first thought may seem obvious: marriage has a particular ceremony, announcement, feast, or suchlike event which marks its beginning. This event may vary in its details from culture to culture, but for both the couple and the public, it marks the beginning of the marriage. Before it, the two are recognized as single and unmarried, but afterward, they are known to be joined in marriage.

In the Bible, any relationship which assumes privileges of marriage before the wedding is considered a morally wrong relationship. It is not considered valid marriage. Thus, a “common-law marriage” is not true marriage. Even when recognized by the state as official (after a given time of cohabitation), it fails to meet Biblical criteria. The line between fornication and marriage is virtually impossible to draw if the beginning of marriage is not marked by a particular event, by some form of a wedding.

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4. Marriage should include those social or civil steps which make it a legitimate marriage in one's society.

In the Book of Ruth we find Boaz taking careful socio-civil steps in his marriage to Ruth (see Ruth 3:12, 13; 4:1-11). Jewish social practices by the time of Christ included a covenant with witnesses at the time of espousal and a feast with family and friends at the time of marriage. Although the Bible does not prescribe any socio-civil steps for marriage, we can assume God's people have followed and should follow social propriety and civil guidelines in getting married. (See also Romans 13:1.)

As we noted in the preceding point, civil law may recognize as valid that which does not meet Biblical requirements (as in a common-law marriage), but a valid marriage should include those social and civil steps which make the marriage legitimate in society.

In North America, this would include public announcements (usually following an espousal), a marriage license, a ceremony performed by a recognized minister or magistrate, and an official record of the ceremony.