

Why marry anyone at all?

Arthur Davis, 31 July 2009

www.arthurandtamie.wordpress.com

Questions for everyone

As Christians, we have loads of questions about relationships, singleness and marriage.

... I want to get married to someone at some point, but how do I prepare for that? ... Should I be going out with a non-Christian? And can I 'flirt to convert' and do 'evangelistic dating', or am I just kidding myself? ... What is my place as a single? Should I see marriage as 'a hope deferred'? ... I'm married to a non-Christian. Is that okay? ... As a married person, how do I serve and support others, whether they're married or not? ...

For all of us, whether we're single, married or somewhere in between, I want to sketch out a few pointers. We'll start by thinking about marriage and then end on singleness.

Now, say you're going out with Mr X or Miss Y. At some level, you're probably asking yourself whether you should marry them. Maybe they're

Christian; maybe they're not. Maybe you wonder whether they're good for you; maybe you wonder whether you're good for them.

Actually, there's a much bigger question for you, and it's a question that each of us needs to ask, wherever we're up to.

Why marry anyone at all?

Two marriages

The Bible's foundation for marriage is in Genesis 2:18-24. Marriage is a 'one flesh' relationship involves a man and a woman 'leaving and cleaving' to enter a shared life trajectory of involvement in God's world. This marriage forms a beautiful and unique wellspring for the growth of children and societies, by which the Earth will be 'filled' and 'ruled' (Gen 1:26-28).

This Genesis marriage has a truly global scope. It's for everyone: for two Christians; for two non-Christians; for a Christian and a non-Christian. God has graciously woven this marriage unit as a pattern into creation to bless *all* couples, children and societies—whether or not any of them actually acknowledge God. As we'll touch on later, this marriage is part of how God graciously curbs the full flight of sin in our broken world.

Within this big picture of marriage, there's a new story: *one dies for another to give her new life*. This is Christian marriage, found in Ephesians 5:22-33. It's a specific way of being 'one flesh'. This relationship self-consciously models the gospel. Just as Jesus sacrificed his life for the church, so Christian husbands give up their lives for their wives; just as the church submits to Jesus, so Christian wives submit to their husbands. Christian marriage involves two people submitting their own lives to Christ, which makes it a relationship characterised by self-sacrifice, other-centeredness and loving service in a way that other marriages never can be. In this sense, Christian marriage is more true, more real, more life-giving than any other marriage.

Now, you might think that two Christians make a Christian marriage. That's not so; two Christians are not enough. The essential ingredient is Christ. In a Christian marriage, it takes three to tango. This partly explains why two

committed Christians can find themselves in a very wonky marriage: they haven't understood how Jesus should transform their relationship with each other.

Both these marriages—all marriages!—are *God-given and good*. We can't say either of them is sinful, or that getting married is a sin in itself, because God has built marriage into his good creation for us. Marriage is part of God's good pattern for human relationships. Of course, that doesn't mean marriages are free from sin; sin stains everything. In fact, marriages only ever dodge sin by God's sheer mercy. However, that doesn't decrease the goodness of marriage. Even marriages between those who are turned against Christ may still be places of beauty and goodness.

Now, if it's no sin to get married, does that mean it doesn't matter who you marry? Well, maybe that's not the right question. The big question here is not, 'Who should I marry' but 'What kind of marriage do I want?' Of course, who you marry will affect what kind of marriage you have, but the question is which of the two marriages you aspire to. Marriage is a matter of wisdom. Marriage is always good *but it is not always wise*.

This is where we can get confused. Many Christians are so keen to steer their friends away from *unwise* marriages that they skip over the *goodness* of all marriages. On the flipside, we assume that a marriage is automatically wise simply because it involves two Christians.

If you are in fact considering marriage to a non-Christian, here are some of the wisdom questions to work through:

- Are your life trajectories compatible (or at least non-contradictory) so that you can hope for a stable life partnership?
- You can have no control over how your partner responds to God, or how God will answer your prayers. There is no real ground for anticipating a future Christian marriage. Are you prepared for the reality that a Christian relationship may never eventuate?

- Without sharing a common identity in Christ, you will be unable to pray together, challenge and encourage one another in Christ. At least on a pragmatic level, you will probably be operating as if your Christian identity is a private, internal matter. Christians married to non-Christians often speak of the loneliness of this. Are you prepared for a relationship that will not essentially benefit your walk with God?
- You may believe that your faith will be able to cope with this. But is your faith worth gambling with? We can trust that our God will always be our gracious provider and sustainer, but it's hardly our place to test him on that. 'Our' faith is not our own but God's gift (Eph 2:8). God has entrusted our faith to us to be cherished and multiplied in every possible way, not to be deliberately put on ice or endangered.
- We have a holy calling as 'new creations' (2 Cor 5:14–6:2). Living in God's new way of light involves cutting ourselves off from the old way of darkness, so Paul says 'do not be yoked together with unbelievers' (2 Cor 6:14–7:1). While that may not simply mean 'do not marry a non-Christian', it does mean we have to think hard about our life priorities. We'll explore this more next.

This brings us back to that wisdom issue. Which of the two marriages do you aspire to? Do you want a married life, or do you want a married life that is Christ-focused, Spirit-empowered and *truly love-filled*? A Christian with a non-Christian partner can only be sure of the first.

1 Corinthians 7

Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 7 are a key passage on marriage and singleness, so it's worth looking at in some detail. Have the text handy as we go through it; if you're reading on-screen, you can find it at <http://bit.ly/H7ryE>. There's a tension that emerges:

It doesn't matter if or whom you marry—
But it does!

The Christians in Corinth, possibly including Paul himself, believed that Jesus' return was imminent. On top of this, there was some kind of crisis in Corinth, possibly a food shortage. With these world-shaking things in mind, the Corinthians had asked Paul (7:1) if they should drop everything—including their betrothals, marriages and sex lives. Feeling they needed to somehow prepare themselves for Jesus' arrival, they wanted to know if they should change their circumstances. Paul's words here are therefore a framework for how to live in view of Jesus' return.

7:1-9 Paul begins by affirming marriage and sex. Marriage is a powerful deterrent against sin because it's the right place for sexual expression. Married couples should take full advantage of this (v5). Here, there are just two things required of married Christians: praying or going for it!

7:10-16 Next, Paul speaks to the married Corinthians. Some were married to non-Christians and wondering if they should get divorced, presumably trying to cut worldly ties. Paul's words here are therefore for new Christians who find themselves in pre-existing, 'half-Christian' marriages. It's important to note that this section is not a licence for marriage with a non-Christian; it doesn't apply to anyone considering entering a marriage.

Let's briefly explore Paul's reason for upholding these half-Christian marriages. He explains that the unbelieving spouse and children have become sanctified or holy through the believer (v14). Paul clearly doesn't mean that the spouse and children have gained a new status before God; he goes on to imply that an unbeliever's salvation is anything but guaranteed (v16). Rather, he means that the unbelievers have gained a new proximity to God through their alliance with a believer. This is something worth preserving. Again, note that Paul provides this as a consolation for half-Christian marriages rather than a positive foundation for marriage.

The Godward life

7:17-40 It turns out that all of Paul's commands and comments are flowing from one big idea, which Paul introduced at the very beginning of 1 Corinthians: the 'Godward' life. God's ways are not the world's ways (1 Cor 1:17–2:16), and we now have the mind of Christ (2:16) so that we can live in this holy calling (1:2). As Godward people, we have an all-encompassing new orientation towards God. As we'll see, we're no longer free to decide, 'I'm going to marry someday' or 'I'm going to remain single'.

This Godward life comes out as Paul continues in chapter 7. We must now live in obedience to God (1 Cor 7:19, 35) with the end in sight: God's new creation approaches to supersede this old one (vv29–31). This totally alters every aspect of our life and ethics. From social to vocational positions, all life circumstances have now been transcended by the new pursuit of Godward living. We have no ultimate need to change the circumstances in which God has put us (v17) because we now belong to God and nothing can shake that. *Whether we're single or married is not ultimately important.*

Godward living transforms our approach to singleness and marriage. Because our circumstances are of no ultimate consequence before God, we may still get married (v2, v9, v28, v36, v39).¹ At the same time, however, marriage is not some neutral choice. Marriage cuts two ways. While marriage can restrain sin (as we saw earlier), Paul goes on to say that marriage can easily distract us from God because of the extra obligations it brings (v28, vv32–35). You could say that a marriage will either *halve or double* our Godward life. Marriage is a very serious, even risky choice for anyone hoping to see the new creation. We must do *whatever it takes* to pursue a Godward life, a life of 'undivided devotion' to Jesus (v35). If there is even a hint that a marriage will paralyse this, it must be avoided. On that point, it's worth noting that Paul actually provides a generic answer to our earlier wisdom question: a new spouse must 'belong to the Lord' (v39). At no point is there any thought of *starting* a half-Christian marriage.

1. Paul is probably speaking to 'engaged' couples. This first-century betrothal was a serious, legally binding arrangement that could only be ended with a divorce. Although things are different today, I don't think this changes the principles that Paul is speaking from, which is what I'm getting at.

It doesn't matter if or whom you marry—
But it does!

Our big question has changed now. It's not, 'Should I marry?' but, 'How can I best live for God?' This is why Paul so strongly affirms singleness as the 'position of choice' for serving God (v1, v8, v38, v40), which we'll look at next. If there is any straightforward endorsement of marriage found in 1 Corinthians 7, it is that marriage provides a restraint for sin (v2, v9, v36). In other words, you should get married if you can't control yourself sexually (and, in vv8-9, that includes the ladies too). This is a good and right thing to do. Plus, if a marriage will actually enable you to more fully devote yourself to God, it is a *wise* thing too.

In the end, Paul hasn't just given us a framework for thinking about our circumstances. He's also given us some direct challenges and encouragements. He effectively states that half-Christian marriages are unwise (v39). He affirms that to be single is most wise (v38-40).

Where does this leave us today? For those of us considering a half-Christian marriage or an unwise marriage, the message is a warning: *don't be unwise; don't marry that person; keep pursuing a Godward life!* Don't kid yourself by thinking, 'This may be an unwise marriage but marriage is good, so I'll just go ahead anyway'. If there is any chance that your relationship is unwise, you are fooling with your life as one of God's people, the life that God himself won for you in Christ.

For those of us who already find ourselves in half-Christian marriages or in marriages that were once unwise, the message is an encouragement: *your marriage is good; stay married; keep pursuing a Godward life!* No matter how unwise your marriage may have been, God empowers you to live wisely in it as you pursue the Godward life.

A call to the church

Where does this leave us in terms of Christian community? We need to rethink our assumptions about relationships. Firstly, there is no sense in which marriage is some kind of ideal state for Christians. Of course, singleness is not the ideal either; we've seen that circumstances do not ultimately matter in the Godward life. The point is this: *marriage does not belong on a pedestal.*

Secondly, while marriage is good, we are confused if we assume that marriage is automatically a wise choice for any two Christians. An unwise marriage will hijack Godward living, as Paul warns. Marriage has the capacity to interrupt, slow or derail a Godward life. There are weddings we can celebrate with complete joy and there are weddings that we know will require extra hard work to follow. Avoiding unwise marriage is of the deepest, sharpest importance as we pursue Godward lives. This means that we need a more tempered, careful endorsement of marriage: *marriage is not ultimate—the Godward life is.*

Thirdly, there is a sense in which *singleness is always the wise circumstance.* This is a strong statement, both for Christians who value marriage and for Christians who struggle with singleness, but we need to hear Paul's emphases. There is a sense in which the Godward road is clearer for a single Christian, which is what Paul is getting at in 7:38-40. Of course, it's not as if singleness is easy. It certainly requires sexual self-control, for one thing (as does any marriage, which we seem to forget!). Yet singleness does provide a unique freedom for Godward living. A Christian single has the capacity to turn their whole life towards God's service, unencumbered by family concerns.

This reveals an urgent need for the church. Singles continue to feel marginalised and lonely in our churches—yet this is not just a need for singles but *the whole church*. This is *our* need. We are in the great family of God, the most diverse Body in all creation, yet we are impoverished by our preoccupation with the nuclear family.² We fail to provide a place for singles to *our* loss. We might give lip service to singles and singleness but do we affirm them in action? If we believe, like Paul, *that singleness is truly unique and*

2. We could also explore the extent to which the nuclear family is a distinctly modern, Western idea.

wonderful, we will begin to see singles in a new light: singles are potentially our most loving friends; our most sacrificial servants; our most effective ministry leaders; our most glowing examples of Christ-likeness. We could well say that singles are our flag-bearers for the Godward life. It's no surprise that Jesus was single.

We are well used to investing in marriage. It's time we began investing in singleness.