



CANADIAN CONFERENCE
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

ARTICLE 11 [MB Confession of Faith]

Marriage, Singleness and Family

COMMENTARY

The Bible teaches that the covenant commitment of marriage is for establishing a lifelong relationship which will provide the context for child rearing. Some will not marry, and Scripture teaches that single persons are positioned to serve the Lord without the distractions of family life. The Bible forbids divorce, laments its occurrence, restricts remarriage, but suggests that pastoral care for those who have experienced divorce should include forgiveness and restoration to fellowship. Article 11 deals with the matters of marriage, divorce, singleness, and family.

Marriage

Marriage in the Old Testament:

God created humans as sexual beings, male and female (Gen. 1:27). The creation narrative expresses the Creator's design for men and women. Humans, male and female, are given the mandate to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth . . ." (Gen. 1:28 NRSV). It was not good for a man (Adam) to be alone; God saw that he needed a helper as his partner (Gen. 2:18). The narrative teaches that "a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24 NRSV). In this pristine state the first pair was naked, yet unashamed (Gen. 2:25).

The story seems to suggest several principles. Marriage has multiple purposes. First, marriage responds to the human need for intimacy. Man and woman were created to be companions. Second, it provides the context for reproduction, a mandate that is part of the creation order that God saw as "very good" (Gen. 1:31). Marriage is the foundation for families. Third, marriage is the context for starting a new family unit. At marriage, the narrative teaches, the man leaves his parents and cleaves to his wife. Fourth, marriage is the context for sexual intercourse. Husband and wife cling to each other as a single flesh. Fifth, intimacy seems to be blessed with a sense of holy mutual delight. There is a frankness, a loosing of restrictions, that is encountered in marital union. Sixth, marriage is a one-to-one commitment. Although later Old Testament saints engaged in polygamy, the creation order does not anticipate that this practice is good. Seventh, marriage is heterosexual. Creation order precludes the possibility that homosexual union will be blessed with the goodness of marriage between a man and woman.

The narrative of the fall (Genesis 3) indicates that sin has marred the goodness of creation. The distortions include an alienation between the first marital pair, which is destined by the curse of sin to continue to afflict later couples. The wife faces pain in childbirth and pain in her relationship with her mate, characterized as desire for her husband who would rule over her (Gen. 3:16).

The legal code reinforces the creation mandate. Adultery is prohibited in the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:14; Deut. 5:18). An extensive catalog of rules related to sexuality includes prohibition of incest and homosexual unions (Leviticus 18 contains a series of these rules). The law assumes that marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman for life.

The Old Testament narrative raises issues for marriage. The complications of Abraham's relationship with Sarah when he takes Hagar as a surrogate include not only the pain that Sarah feels but alienation in later international relations with the children of Ishmael. Jacob's wives and concubines struggle in the face of jealousy and favoritism. David, the man after God's own heart, acts like an ancient near eastern despot by taking multiple wives and faces the consequences of the resulting rivalries within his family. His son Solomon attempts to establish his royal power by taking 1,000 wives and concubines.



The prophets use the demand for loyalty within the marriage covenant as an illustration to confront Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh. Hosea takes a wife of prostitution to demonstrate what Yahweh has experienced in the covenant with Israel. Malachi condemns a husband's failure to be loyal to the wife of his youth (2:14-16).

The wisdom literature, especially the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon, celebrate the joy of marriage. Proverbs calls a happy marriage a gift from Yahweh (12:4; 18:22; 19:14). Ecclesiastes teaches that a man should enjoy life with the wife he loves (9:9). Song of Solomon celebrates the sensual delight of intimacy.

Marriage in the New Testament:

When Jesus teaches about marriage, he bases his instruction on the creation mandate (Mark 10:6-9). Jesus cites the maleness and femaleness of the marriage partners, the resulting unity of the marriage union, and the permanence of the covenant commitment. Jesus assumes that marriage is a gift from God.

The best interpretation of Paul's household rules of Ephesians 5:22-33 and Colossians 3:18-19 recognizes the revolutionary character of Paul's instruction. Paul addresses the wife as an independent moral individual, calling her to be subject to her husband. This call is part of a larger instruction for mutual submission (Eph. 5:21). The word comes from military terminology, indicating that there is a proper way for members of the household to align themselves with one another. The husband, who receives about twice as many words of instruction as the wife in Ephesians 5, is called to exercise headship as Christ did for the church. This imitation of Christ's love is to be characterized by self-giving devotion. If the husband loves the wife as Christ loved the church, foot washing rather than demanding service and obedience will be the rule.

First Peter 3:1-7 also gives instructions to wives and husbands. Wives are warned against seeking beauty in "outward adornment." Husbands are warned that neglecting their marital vows may hinder their prayers.

Divorce

Although both Old Testament teaching and Jesus agree that divorce contradicts the will of God, both also recognize that, due to human hardness of heart, divorce is a reality.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4:

Four important truths are noted in this text of Mosaic civil law. First, Moses accepts the occurrence of divorce. When he writes, in part, "If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him ... and writes a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house ..." (24:1), Moses simply acknowledges that marriages fail. He doesn't harass the man who is filing the divorce, nor does he rail against the violation of the sanctity and permanence of marriage.

Second, the grounds for divorce in Hebrew society were very general and rather ambiguous. The words of the Deuteronomy text refer to the wife "who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her..." (24:1). The phrase "something indecent" may have included adultery with another man, but this is highly unlikely because the penalty for adultery was death, not divorce (22:22).

Third, a divorced woman who has married another man may never again marry the first husband even if her second husband has died (24:2-4). She may, however, marry her first husband if she has remained unmarried after the certificate of divorce has been issued. The reason given for this restriction is that, if she has remarried and her second husband has either divorced her or has died, "she has been defiled" (24:2-4).

And fourth, Moses, quoting Yahweh, gives a warning: "Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance" (24:4). The context of this statement is the remarriage of a man to his former wife after she has had a second husband. The defilement of the land is not due to divorce being present within the people of God—this is simply part of human tragedy and fallenness. Rather, defilement occurs when a man, who has divorced his wife, remarries her after she, in the intervening period, has been



married to another man.

Malachi 2:13-16:

Although the prophets use the image of divorce to indicate the broken covenant between Yahweh and Israel, it is Malachi who addresses God's response to divorce. In Malachi 2:16 God says simply, "I hate divorce." The context links divorce to violence. The broken covenant is an act of violence against the spouse, the children, and the institution itself.

In Jesus' day, the matter of divorce was hotly discussed. There were two schools of thought on the subject. The school of Shammai, named after a very influential rabbi, was conservative and rigorous in its position. "It maintained that man 'must not divorce his wife unless he has found her in a matter of shame'" (Beare, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 154). The rival school of Hillel held a much more permissible position. A man could divorce her for the merest trifle, 'even if she burnt his food in cooking it'" (Beare, 154).

Matthew 5:31-32:

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus enters the debate and, as with adultery, strengthens and raises the standard immeasurably. With the phrase "But I tell you..." Jesus, while not slamming the door on divorce, calls for a new way of living. The words of Jesus can be divided into three distinct parts. First, Jesus concedes that divorce is a reality in society. Divorce, however, must never be trivialized. The only legitimate grounds for divorce is *porneia*, a debated term which may be defined as "unchastity, fornication of every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse" (Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, Vol. I. p. 15).

Second, the divorced woman is at risk to commit adultery (5:32b). The clause, "causes her to become an adulteress" is somewhat ambiguous in meaning. We can read this clause two ways. First, the words have been taken to mean that in the very act of having been divorced by her husband, the woman now commits adultery. Although some scholars support such a reading, it is very difficult to pin "adultery" on a person who is divorced but who has either not remarried and who is not sexually active. Second, we can interpret this clause to mean, perhaps more logically, that the divorced spouse who has been divorced for *porneia* is continuing in her ways. The words of Jesus then are to be taken as a caution against the newly divorced person living in a reckless, promiscuous manner.

The final word of Jesus is very troublesome: that is, whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. Old Testament Hebrew culture was a strongly patriarchal society. Women were regarded as the property of men. Therefore, it was the prerogative of men to initiate divorce procedures, although the parallel synoptic passage also includes women in this role (Mark 10:1-12). By saying "anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery," Jesus likely regarded "the remarriage of the divorced woman as adultery both on her part and on the part of her new husband" (France, *Matthew*, 123). Therefore the statement places the same value judgment on all post-divorce sexual liaisons regardless of gender.

Mark 10:1-12 (Matthew 19:1-9):

Jesus revisits the question of divorce in Mark 10 after some Pharisees question him. First, Jesus clarifies the Mosaic law as not commanding but allowing divorce. Second, Jesus attributes divorce to hardness of heart. Third, Jesus uses the creation mandate to enjoin life-long marital faithfulness. Fourth, Jesus reiterates his earlier teaching that remarriage involves adultery. Although one may read the text to prohibit all remarriage, it is at least clear that Jesus is teaching that for a married person to get a writ of divorce *for the purpose* of marrying a more appealing person is as adulterous as an affair. In 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 Paul repeats the Lord's command and calls for celibacy for the divorced.

1 Corinthians 6:12-20:

What this text adds to the discussion is the profound biblical understanding that sexual union between two persons is more than simply sex. In the act of sexual union, Paul argues rhetorically, a person (in this case, a man and a prostitute) are inseparably united as one "with her in body" (6:16). In fact, through this sexual act "the two will become one flesh." The act of sexual union is such a powerful bonding force that it is likened to our union with the Lord: "But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with



him in spirit” (6:17). Little wonder that Jesus concedes that *porneia*, illicit sexual union, is grounds for divorce. This adds power to Paul’s cry of warning: “Flee from sexual immorality” (6:18).

Although Scripture warns against remarriage for divorced persons, remarriage has become rather common among believers. The confession of faith implicitly recognizes that divorce and remarriage is a pastoral concern by calling the church to offer “hope and healing” to the divorced. The pastoral application of Article 11 deals with the issues of remarriage.

We need to caution one another about the complexity of remarriage. Many will do well to avoid the complications of remarriage and remain single. Those who contemplate remarriage must address issues of the characteristics which led to marital failure, relations with former spouses, and relations with children from earlier marriages.

Singleness

The creation narrative teaches that humans are created with the need for intimacy. The Genesis text appears to assume that the common pattern for finding intimacy will be within the marriage covenant. Although it is not specifically stated, the Old Testament narratives seem to assume that singleness is not a desirable state.

Within the Old Testament, however, we do find the roots of a theology of service that recognizes the unique contributions of single persons. Yahweh commands that Jeremiah the prophet never marry as a sign to Israel (Jer. 16:1-4). The marriages of Ezekiel and Hosea face interruptions related to their mission.

The story of Ruth results in marriage, but her relationship as a single person with the widow Naomi is characterized by covenant loyalty which is often cited as an example for a couple about to be married. Ruth pledges to go with Naomi, to join her people, and to worship her God. She declares an inseparable love for Naomi.

In the New Testament both Jesus and Paul minister as single persons. Although Scripture is silent regarding Jesus’ celibacy, Paul encourages the church at Corinth to consider celibacy as a gift from God (1 Cor. 7:1-9, 25-35). The benefits of singleness include freedom from distractions that a spouse and children create. Single persons in difficult times are not preoccupied with the security of their family members. Paul considers singleness to be superior to marriage, at least for those who have the gift of celibacy.

The church is called to recognize the honor due, even preference for, the single state. The church must take care not to exclude single persons from church life or from ministry. Special concern must be given to include those who live as singles.

The need for intimacy presents unique challenges to the single person. Sexual chastity is the biblical mandate for single persons (1 Cor. 7:8-9). The need for partnership recognized in the creation story, however, is not absent in the celibate person. Healthy and pure relationships for single persons are necessary for living fulfilling lives in society.

Family

The family in the Old Testament:

The family is the God-ordained social structure designed to nurture children. The primary confession of Israel in Deuteronomy 6:4-9 teaches that spiritual training best happens within day-to-day family life. The Old Testament develops three themes which declare God’s intent for families.

First, children are seen as a gift from God to families. Children are a blessing (Ps. 127:5). The stories of the births of Isaac to Sarah, Jacob and Esau to Rebekah, Joseph to Rachel, and Samuel to Hannah are central to the story of the people of Israel.

Second, children are commanded to honor and respect their parents. Not only were children called to “Honor your father and your mother” (Exod. 20:12), but it was also a capital offense to curse or to strike one’s father or mother (Exod. 21:17).

Third, the blessings of being a covenant people were to be perpetuated through parental instruction and guidance (Deut. 6:1-25). This instruction was to include reciting the narrative of deliverance from Egypt, of keeping the feasts and holy days of Israel, and of speaking of these things each day.



Deuteronomy 6:1-25 highlights four distinct points: First, wellness results when children hear about the great salvation deeds of God and live a life of obedience to the commands of God (6:1-3). Second, the heart of the covenant with Yahweh is to “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (6:5). Third, when the people of Israel would enter the promised land, this knowledge of God would keep them from turning to pagan gods (6:13-19). Fourth, when the people are a long time-period away from the Exodus events and their children ask what these symbols and stories mean, they are to be answered clearly and unambiguously (6:20-25).

The family in the New Testament:

Although Jesus blesses the children who were brought to him by their parents (Mark 10:13-16), Jesus makes it clear that in the kingdom of God our family ties take second place to obeying the will of God (Mark 3:31-35; Luke 14:26). In a real sense, the new community of faith which emerges through belief in Jesus Christ is family for believers.

Jesus’ relationship with his parents reflects his primary commitment to God the Father and the reign of God, as well as his concern for family. In the story of young Jesus at the temple (Luke 2:41-52) it is recorded that Jesus went back to live with his parents in Nazareth and continued under their authority (2:51). Thus “Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and men.” When Mary comes to see her son during his ministry, Jesus seems to postpone contact with her until he has completed his teaching (Mark 3:31-35). At the cross Jesus speaks to the beloved disciple about caring for Mary (John 19:26-27).

Church leaders are to model healthy family life. Among the leadership qualifications mentioned in 1 Timothy 3:1-13, godly leaders are to be those who also demonstrate their ability to manage their families and households well (vv. 4, 12).

In Ephesians 6:1-4, we have the most definitive text of the New Testament on the subject of children and parents. The fifth commandment (Exod. 20:12) is repeated to remind the new people of God of the obligation of children to be courteous and respectful toward their parents. Added to this well-known epithet is an equally important command to parents: “...do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (6:4).

Bibliography

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