

ABSTRACT

The Unbreakable Promise

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The purpose of this paper is to investigate when married Christian couples should divorce. This is an important topic because it is rarely discussed in the Christian community, and divorce is far too common in the Church. This paper starts off with the definition of love, and then gets more specific by looking into romantic love and then eventually marriage. Marriage is set apart from other romantic relationships because of the wedding vows. The wedding vows, the purpose of marriage, and the nature of love all play a big part in answering the question of whether or not couples should divorce. The thesis of this paper is that morally couples should never divorce, even in circumstances when it is legally permissible. The paper then confirms this thesis by looking at the examples of abuse, infidelity, unequally yoked partners, and spouses who jointly desire to divorce.

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THE UNBREAKABLE PROMISE

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the greatest gift God has ever given me, my wife Katherine Elisabeth.

CHAPTER ONE

Understanding Love

“Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” --Matthew 19:6

Introduction

Loving someone is one of the most beautiful things to experience in life. However it is also one of the most challenging; loving someone is not a coward's act. In this thesis it will be examined what it means to love someone, what romantic love is, what marriage entails, and when one should divorce his spouse. *The main argument of this paper is that, although it may be legally permissible in some circumstances, one should morally never divorce his spouse in any circumstance.* This is a Christian-philosophical inquiry into what marriage should be, and the importance of choice in love. The first chapter will examine what love is. The second and third chapters will examine what marriage is and the nature of (wedding) vows. Lastly the fourth chapter will show why the one should never divorce his spouse including in situations of abuse, infidelity, unequally yoked partners (Christian married to a non-Christian), or even when both partners desire a divorce.

This thesis deals with a discussion of perfect love. It is important to note that humans are not perfect and that the unconditional love that is discussed, while it is definitely possible, is rare and may only be achieved by the grace of God.

In this first chapter the goal is to examine the nature of love. The order is thus: First it will be seen what love is not, then it will be more clearly seen what the nature of love is. Next it will be shown why one should love at all, and how love can change. After this general examination of love, romantic love will be defined.

Misunderstandings of Love

In order to understand what love is, first let's look at what love is not. Love is not a feeling. Many accounts of love describe the sensation of "falling in love," as an overwhelming or helpless state in which an individual experiences feelings of infatuation. This sensation can be and usually is a part of romantic love, but it is not love itself. In the Gospels, Jesus says these are the two greatest commandments: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself" (*New International Version*, Mark 12: 30-31). One can learn a lot about the nature of love from these two commandments. First notice that love is something that can be done with almost every aspect of a human being: the heart, soul, mind, and strength. Feelings are not usually described this way. Feelings are usually associated with passion or merely the heart. Also notice that someone can love anybody. One is supposed to love his neighbor no matter who the neighbor is. One cannot always have nice feelings toward everyone, but one can love everyone. These statements imply that love is a choice: one can choose to love God with one's whole being and can choose to love his or neighbor no matter who the neighbor is. Another important thing to note is that if love was a feeling it would be very self-centered. Love would simply be about the individual's feelings. The true nature of love is other-seeking not self-seeking (1 Corinthians 13:5).

Loving something is not the same as liking something. Love is much deeper. As Jonathan Franzen says in the *New York Times*, “There is no such thing as a person whose real self you like every particle of. This is why a world of liking is ultimately a lie. But there is such a thing as a person whose real self you love every particle of” (*Liking is for Cowards*, Franzen). Liking someone is a lesser investment than loving someone. A human being likes something for specific reasons. One likes pizza because it is tasty, or likes his car because it is fast. Love does not work the same way. One loves another *despite* specific reasons¹. One can love somebody whom one does not completely like, in fact one has to (since no one enjoys every aspect of another)! One loves his beloved even though the beloved has certain characteristics that the lover does not enjoy. Love is investing in the entire person, not merely in aspects or traits of that person. Again, loving someone is a choice, one chooses to love another despite any unlikeable qualities of the other. Liking does not allow for this choice; either one likes or one does not. Love requires choosing the whole despite imperfections whereas liking enjoys a particular aspect of the whole. Now that it has been shown what love is not, it will be shown what love is.

The Nature of Love

Love is a choice, but what is one choosing? In his book *One Body*, Alexander Pruss states: “we can, thus, look at love as containing at least three aspects: willing a good to the beloved, appreciating the beloved, and seeking union with the beloved. The willing, appreciating, and seeking union are intertwined” (Pruss 23). Love is a choice to

¹This is a controversial thesis which many, including Aristotle, do not support. However, it is the only way for humans to have unconditional love. It is interesting to consider whether God loves others or Himself despite reasons. Also, it is interesting to consider if one loves himself despite reasons. However, these questions will not be further explored in this thesis.

do the three above things: will a good to the beloved, appreciate the beloved², and seek union with the beloved. This definition seems to cover the aspects of love. The lover is other-seeking, desires to be with the beloved, and appreciates the beloved for who he is. By deciding to love someone one is choosing to do the three above things. Note that this definition of love can be applied to all forms of love including loving a stranger, a friend, or loving someone romantically. The union of all three of these different relationships would look different, the good done to each might be different, and the appreciation of each would also be different. Pruss argues that knowledge is what helps one love appropriately. One has to know his beloved and himself in order to understand what relationship is shared between them. One has to know what is a good to the other in the context of that relationship, and one has to truly know the other (including the other's flaws) in order to truly appreciate the other. So love is an informed choice involving willing good, seeking union, and appreciating, despite the other's flaws. Love is not focused on oneself³ but on the other.

Love is focused on the benefit to the other. As can be seen from the three tenets of love above, the lover is not loving for his own sake. As Merton explains in *Love and Living*, "Love is not a deal, it is a sacrifice" (34). As a lover, one is not concerned with what he is getting out of the deal, but is willing to give up personal happiness for the beloved. Jesus says, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). The greatest act of love involves one of the greatest acts of sacrifice. Furthermore the greatest act of love is a blueprint for lesser acts of love:

²Appreciating something can indeed be a choice initially, which then turns into a feeling (similar to thankfulness). However more often than not, appreciation of one's beloved flows from the lover's choice to will the beloved's good and to seek union with beloved.

³Excluding self-love.

Sacrifice is an attribute of love. This is because by willing good and seeking union with another one creates duties external to one's own good. Self-sacrifice is an integral part of willing good to others. At the very least one will have to sacrifice time in order to will good for another and to seek out union with another. This shows that love wills the good for another over willing good for oneself. Love also enriches one's life. The purpose of love involves willing the good of the other, but willing good to another brings good to oneself. As Merton beautifully describes,

—...love is not just something that happens to you: it is a certain special way of being alive. Love is, in fact, an intensification of life, a completeness, a fullness, a wholeness of life... Love is our true destiny. We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone—we find it with another... we will never be fully real until we let ourselves fall in love—either with another human person or with God— (Merton 27).

Love beautifies both the lover and the beloved. Something about self-sacrifice brings self-fulfillment. Merton argues that one can never reach his full potential, or even reach true self-understanding without love. C.S. Lewis agrees: “We need others physically, emotionally, intellectually; we need them if we are to know anything, even ourselves” (Lewis 2). A lover can see potential and truths of his beloved better than the beloved can see in himself. The lover also learns more about himself by loving the beloved. Thus, self-realization is a benefit that both the beloved and the lover receive from the relationship. Fulfillment also comes to both sides of a love relationship. One cannot be fully human without loving another: love and relationships are essential to a good human life (“it is not good for man to be alone”). Thus through the self-sacrifice of love one truly finds oneself and enriches one's own life.

Why Love?

It has been discussed that love is a choice. Now it will be investigated why one should make the choice in the first place. Why love? More specifically why love a certain person? It is obvious that one should not love another based on the beloved's flaws. Should a person be loved for his virtues or certain characteristics?

Say person A loves person B for his blue eyes and kind heart. These are repeatable characteristics. Let us also suppose that mankind has created a cloning machine that can clone not only appearance but also character traits. Scientists can clone person B so that the clone has blue eyes, a kind heart, and looks and acts like person B. Should person A also love clone B in the same way, and if so what makes his love of person B unique? It should be problematic that a unique being does not have a unique reason for being loved. But most if not all reasons to love someone seem as though they can be repeated in some way. Whatever makes someone unique is not identifiable to the human eye; there is no visible explanation to what truly makes a self a self. So any reason that can be thought of can be repeated and thus is no longer a good reason to love that person⁴.

Yet it also seems problematic to love someone for no reason at all. Does person A love person B just because? This seems ridiculous as well. If love has absolutely no reason, then there is no reason to love one unique person over another. Also if there is no reason to love someone, there is no reason to continue to love someone. In reality it feels

⁴ It is interesting to consider whether time shared or memories are repeatable characteristics or not. It seems dubious that time shared could be exactly replicated, however time shared still is not a good enough reason to love someone. A Christian should be able to love his neighbor with or without time shared/memories.

as though one loves another for specific reasons. Maybe the answer is in the commitment.

Committing to love someone is the reason one loves another and continues to love another. Person A loves person B because person A *commits* to love person B.

Reimagine the cloning scenario. If person A loves person B for repeatable characteristics (such as blue eyes and a kind heart) than person A should also love the clone of person B, even if he knows it is a clone. However, if person A loves person B because he commits to love person B, than person A would not love the clone of person B, unless he also chose to commit to love the clone. For he has committed to specifically love the unique individual which is person B (and which is not the clone). Remember that liking involves reasons. This is why it seems as though things are loved for reasons; often in cases of love, especially in the case of romantic love, liking precedes loving. One usually is attracted to someone for likeable reasons before deciding to love that person. It is a natural progression. However when one commits to love, it is not for those likeable qualities. This is not to say that these qualities do not play a role in the relationship. Earlier it was mentioned that knowledge is crucial to true love. Knowing and appreciating characteristics of the beloved is part of love and this plays a role in how one *specifically* loves another, but not why one loves another.

How and When Love Changes

The form of love can change between people, but perfect love never ceases altogether. A romantic relationship, a friendship, or any type of union of love can change depending upon how the people in the relationship change. Aristotle talks about ceasing

to be someone's friend when they no longer share the same virtues (Aristotle 1165b)⁵. Since love is based on knowledge of oneself and the beloved, the type of love can change based on how the people in the relationship change. This is not contrary to loving someone despite reasons. Although one loves another despite reasons, another's "reasons" or characteristics influence the type of union that the love involves (however in some cases the type of union cannot change, which will be seen later). For instance a romantic interest can become a friend if one realizes that his beloved is his cousin. A friend can become someone whom one loves as a human being but not necessarily as a friend. Such is the case when trust cannot be repaired between two people: They should cease the friendship, but should still love one another as old friends or at least as human beings. The union can change between people and thus the good desired and the appreciation for that person can change, however love is still there as long as one has chosen to love. Thus reasons play a role in the type of love, but not in whether or not to love. Pruss clarifies:

—If I begin to love someone in a particular way, does love require me to keep on loving *in the same way*? Clearly not. There is, rather, a tendency in love itself to improve the love, so as to love the beloved in a better, more appropriate way. The balance of the characteristic features of love and of the ways in which they are expressed in the relationship could be inappropriate. Thus it would be inappropriate for a parent to insist on the wrong kind or degree of union with a child, say, a union that fails to allow for an appropriate independence, especially if the child is an adult. And if the parent insisted on the inappropriate union, the parent would not be faithful to love— (Pruss 28).

⁵The difference between Aristotle and me here is that Aristotle would say that one could stop loving another completely. I say one can only stop loving another as a friend depending on the nature of the changing union, but love would still exist. For Aristotle, love is based on another's goodness, whereas this paper takes love to be a good in itself which should be bestowed upon everyone whether they are good or not. However, we both agree that there are circumstances in which friendships should cease.

Thus, love changes in order to love correctly. It is interesting that the degree of the parent-child union can change as the child or parent changes, however there is always a base parent-child union that does not change⁶. Imagine a case where a parent and child were no longer friends due to certain irreparable circumstances, but the parent-child union still existed: the child still respected the parent as someone who gave him life, and the parent still wished for the well-being of his child. Familial love has a base unchanging union because one cannot change whom one is related to. Marriage love has an even stronger base union (this will be covered in the next chapter) which cannot be changed. Although, like familial love, it has aspects of union which change as spouses change. Again one still has to choose to love his family or spouse, but once this choice is made there is an unchanging base of the type of union. The union can still vary in degree but the union will always be familial or spousal.

However love itself should not cease as people change. Once one chooses to love, love ought to always remain. Here is why: One loves the beloved (in any type of love) despite the beloved's flaws. Flaws can get worse and new flaws can appear in an individual. However the love never depends upon the flaws of someone, so the foundation of love does not change even as flaws evolve. Even as forms of love change, one would never have a good reason to stop loving completely, for one began to love despite any of the good reasons not to. For example, say A loves B as his friend, despite B's flaws. B and A can change over time so that their interests are no longer similar, or so that they no longer enjoy spending time together. Although A and B should no longer be friends, A should still love B but the union/relationship would be different. Maybe A

⁶Love between parent and child is also a choice. A parent can choose to abandon his child and vice versa. So, although it is an obvious choice, one still must choose to love one's parent or child.

loves B as a past friend, an acquaintance or simply as a human being. Since love does not begin with certain reasons, neither does it end because of certain reasons. It is important to note that liking has reasons, and that liking usually precedes loving (although this is not necessary or always the case). One can like someone for many reasons; however when one commits to love another it is not for the likeable reasons but despite the non-likeable reasons, for loving someone entails loving someone wholly not just the likeable bits and pieces⁷. Thus, in theory one would always love someone whom one once loved, even if the form of love changes. Since human beings are not perfect, and do not love perfectly this might not always be the case, but perfect love never ceases. Because humans are not perfect, one way to ensure lasting love is a vow (again this will be explored in the following chapters).

It is interesting to consider what this means for a Christian who is called to love everyone as a neighbor. In the first chapter of *One Body*, Pruss says, “—a truly unconditional love would be one that could have no good reason to terminate as long as my beloved continued to exist” (Pruss 37). The most basic form of love that a Christian has for another is the love of another human as a creature of God. Thus at the very least a

⁷It could be argued that one’s likeable qualities makes up for one’s unlikeable qualities. However, if one loves another only based on the likeable qualities, even if they “overpowered” the unlikeable qualities, this would not be perfect love. The lover works for the good of the beloved. He is not focused on the likeable parts over the unlikeable, but rather the lover accepts the likeable and the unlikeable qualities. In fact, it will be argued later that part of love, especially in marriage, is to help beautify the beloved. The lover accepts the unlikeable qualities but tries to help the beloved get rid of the beloved’s vices for the beloved’s sake. The beloved’s vices are not necessarily the same as the unlikeable qualities, although they can be.

Christian should always love everyone as a creation of God⁸. Since everyone is indeed a creation of God, there is no good reason to terminate love.

The permanence of love can also be seen in how the Bible talks of love. In the well-known verse in 1 Corinthians, Paul says about love: “It *always* protects, *always* trusts, *always* hopes, *always* perseveres. Love never fails” (1 Corinthians 13:7-8, emphasis added). Love by nature should be unconditional. Just as God never stops loving his people, so should his people never stop loving. In fact since God is love, and God is never ending and permanent, love is unending and permanent. It will be discussed how humans can have permanent love, especially in marriage, in the following chapter.

Romantic Love

Romantic love is the primary concern of this thesis and needs to be defined. Romantic love involves physical affection. Pruss states, “Romantic love involves loving the other as embodied, and not just as an intellectual being” (Pruss 83). However, Pruss goes on to say that this is not the defining feature of love. Imagine a friendship that included lifting weights as a shared activity. These friends could very well admire and love the other as an embodied being but it would not be romantic. Thus Pruss specifies, “While romantic love need neither imply nor be implied by any sexual behavior, romantic love has an essential connection with sexuality” (Pruss 83). It is a specific kind of love for the beloved’s body that makes love romantic, specifically a sexual love of the beloved’s body. Pruss clarifies even further to say that romantic love seeks sexual union.

⁸It could be argued that being a creature of God is the likeable quality that allows one to love another. This can be a reason that spurs a Christian to *choose* to love another, but the choice surpasses liking. One chooses to love not only because the beloved is a creature of God, but also despite the flaws in this beloved creature.

So while romantic love does not necessarily entail sexual intercourse it seeks such a union and appreciates the beloved in a sexual way.

However romantic love is not merely sexual; in fact it seems to be one of the deepest forms of human love. Romantic love not only seeks an embodied union but also an intellectual union. If romantic love only sought an embodied union it would be considered animalistic. Since humans are embodied souls, the romantic lover chooses his beloved with both the whole person in sight. Without seeking intellectual or spiritual union the “romantic love” would be lust. This would not be love since it would be merely seeking bodily pleasure for itself⁹. Without seeking an embodied union the “romantic love” would be friendship. One might even call romantic love friendship with a sexual aspect (although this is probably an oversimplification). Since human beings are embodied beings, romantic love seems to seek a more complete union than any other kind of love. This type of love incorporates the whole human being, and is the most human kind of love. Also consider that only humans can love romantically. Animals cannot love at all (due to animals lacking the intellectual cognition to commit to love in the way that humans can). The angels’ love and God’s love is not sexual in nature and thus cannot be romantic. Since romantic love is the deepest form of love among humans the Bible uses it to describe God’s relationship with us. Not because God’s love is romantic in nature, but because this is the most complete kind of love a human can understand. Romantic love is what Jesus uses to describe his relationship to the church, specifically marriage. In fact marriage is the culmination of romantic love. It will be

⁹It could be argued that one actually sought the bodily pleasure or good of the beloved, not himself. However, this still would not be love. Giving someone bodily pleasure without willing the good to the person’s soul or intellect would not be good for the person overall. This is not the case with all bodily pleasure but with sexual pleasure specifically. This is because sex is not merely a bodily good but is an act of the soul and the body. Dividing the bodily and the personal aspects of sex is not good for anyone.

seen that the marriage relationship is the deepest form of human love, and the closest to unconditional love among human beings.

Conclusion

In summary, love is a commitment to accept another human being in whole; it is the commitment to will the good of the beloved, appreciate the beloved, and seek union with the beloved. It is not the same as a feeling, especially the feeling of liking something. Humans like things for particular reasons, but they love simply because they commit to do so. Once someone decides to love another that love should not cease. Although, the type of union or the degree of union of the love can change as the people in that relationship change. Love is completely focused on the beloved, though it is not void of benefits for the lover. Through the giving of love the lover reveals a deeper meaning to his life. Romantic love is the most meaningful kind of love between humans. Marriage, which is the peak of romantic love, is the deepest most permanent type of human relationship. How love and choice play a role in marriage, and how marriage is the peak of romantic love will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO

Marriage

Introduction

Marriage is glorious but difficult. In this chapter marriage will be defined and discussed. Then it will be investigated how marriage is the peak of romantic love, what the focus of marriage is, and what the purpose of marriage is. After this second chapter, the nature of vows will be further discussed in the third chapter.

Marriage Defined

First, marriage needs to be defined. Marriage is not a piece of paper or a legal institution. Marriage is a deep commitment to another person. What makes a marriage is the willingness to be committed to one and only one person¹⁰. As Timothy Keller puts it: “In sharp contrast with our culture, the Bible teaches that the essence of marriage is a sacrificial commitment to the good of the other. That means that love is more fundamentally action than emotion” (Keller 83). As was discussed earlier, love is by nature a sacrificial action. Love is a choice to will the good of the beloved. Marriage is a form of romantic love; it is a romantic union between spouses¹¹. The difference between

¹⁰For the sake of this thesis, marriage refers to an exclusive heterosexual relationship between two people bound by vows.

¹¹Some argue that marriage is more of a friendship than a romance. In truth marriage probably could be described as being more friendship like than romantic during certain phases of marriage. However

a romantic relationship and a marriage relationship is the level of commitment. The wedding vows generate the deep commitment that other romantic relationships do not have. Each spouse vows to love the other spouse for the rest of his or her life. This is a serious commitment, and it defines marriage. Marriage is a lifelong commitment between spouses to love each other exclusively until death¹². After death marriage does not persist: ““At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven”” (Matthew 22:30). To summarize, marriage is a form of romantic love which is given its character by the wedding vows. Marriage is a lifelong exclusive romantic relationship.

Marriage as the Peak of Romantic Love

In the previous chapter it was said that marriage is the peak of romantic love. This does not seem intuitively true. Often when one thinks of the peak of romantic love one thinks of a passionate sexual encounter. Marriage is sometimes thought of being the opposite: dull and sexless. However, remember the definition of romantic love. Romantic love is a love that involves bodily union and intellectual/spiritual union; the romantic lover wills the bodily and intellectual good for his beloved, appreciates the beloved as an embodied intellectual creature, and seeks both a sexual union and intellectual union with the beloved. Marriage allows for all of these aspects of love, in a deeper way, due to the time and commitment aspects of marriage. Since marriage entails a lifelong commitment, it allows for a consistent exclusive romantic relationship. Both a longer duration and exclusivity strengthen romantic love. Unlike other forms of love,

romantic love is itself a form of friendship that seeks sexual union. Marriage is romantic in nature since its consummation is sexual intercourse.

¹²This is assumed based on how Jesus describes marriage and divorce in the Gospels.

such as friendship, romantic love is better when it is only between two people. This is because romantic love demands more of the lover than some other forms of love; romantic love involves loving another both physically and spiritually. Due to the extent of the romantic union this automatically makes it harder to love more than one person romantically. It is hard to will the good for multiple people, as well as appreciate and seek union with multiple people, in the deep way that romantic love requires. Thus loving multiple people romantically leads to the people involved getting hurt. One who romantically loves many, does not love any of them well. Besides the fact that it is difficult to love multiple people romantically, romantic love by nature desires exclusivity. There is a general notion of faithfulness in romantic love even when it is not guaranteed by wedding vows. It is rare to find someone who has a problem with his friend having multiple friends, but it is rarer to find one who does *not* have a problem with his romantic partner having other romantic lovers. Romantic love by nature also desires longevity.

Timothy Keller says:

G.K. Chesterton pointed out that when we fall in love we have a natural inclination not just to express affection but to make promises to each other. Lovers find themselves almost driven to make vow-like claims. “I will always love you,” we say when we are at the height of passion, and we know that the other person, if he or she is in love with us, will want to hear those words. Real love, the Bible says, instinctively desires permanence (Keller 90).

Keller and G.K. Chesterton are saying something that all lovers notice: Romantic love desires permanence. This is why romantic relationships are usually the hardest to terminate, and why, when they are terminated, it can feel devastating. Not only does Keller state that romantic love desires permanence, but he also says romantic love has the inclination to make vow-like claims and promises. Similarly Pruss agrees: “Given that

romantic love calls for the deepest possible union at all levels of the person, especially including the physical level, it is plausible that romantic love calls for something like this kind of commitment, namely, for a marriage “-‘until death do us part’” (Pruss 162). As stated above, romantic love is one of the deepest human relationships. It is fitting that the deepest human love calls for the deepest form of human commitment, namely marriage.

Thus marriage is the peak of romantic love, because romantic love finds its true nature in marriage: Romantic love finds guaranteed exclusivity and permanence in marriage. These qualities are guaranteed by the wedding vows that spouses make. In addition to the exclusivity and longevity, marriage also provides romantic relationships with conditions for a deeper romantic relationship. This is because the marriage vows allow for a deeper nakedness, physical and spiritual, between spouses. This in turn gives the lover more knowledge of his beloved, which allows for a deeper union. There is more physical and spiritual openness which allows for a deeper physical and spiritual union, a deeper romantic love. How vows create this environment will be further discussed in the next chapter. To summarize, marriage is the peak of romantic love since the deepest form of romantic love is found in marriage. Marriage is the deepest form of romantic love because it allows for exclusivity of romantic partners and “till death do us part.” Furthermore romantic love desires marriage. Romantic love calls for the exclusivity and longevity that can only be found in marriage.

Focus of Marriage

Next the focus of the marriage relationship needs to be discussed. There is a modern philosophy of finding the perfect spouse. This philosophy is based on finding a

spouse who fits into one's life perfectly. One should not have to make any changes at all in order to marry the "perfect spouse" according to this philosophy. This implicitly shows a very self-focused view of marriage. No one is perfect, and a perfect spouse does not exist¹³. One who is searching for a perfect spouse is searching for someone who does not need to be improved, someone who is easy to love. He is searching for someone who fits his needs. This is contrary to love. Love is not focused on self, and neither is marriage.

Others argue that the marriage relationship itself should be the focus of marriage. Instead of focusing on oneself maybe the spouse should focus on the marriage itself. In this situation the spouse values the health of the marriage relationship and puts energy and time into making the relationship great. This latter view is certainly better than the former, however neither is adequate. The focus of marriage should be on the other spouse. Say person A and person B are married. Spouse A should not focus on himself, nor on the marriage relationship, but on his spouse B. And likewise B should focus on A. This in fact leads to the healthiest marriage. By focusing on the other spouse, the spouses strengthen each other and thus the marriage relationship. This is in accordance with love. Love does not focus on itself, but on the beloved¹⁴. A good way to see this is that absence makes the heart grow fonder, but the lover does not desire the beloved to be absent.

¹³Even if the "perfect spouse" did exist, he would eventually change and no longer be perfect.

¹⁴This leads to an interesting thought about one searching for the person that he could be the best spouse to. While one should consider compatibility with one's future spouse, one should also realize that whoever one marries will change throughout time. So rather than trying to find the person that one could be the best spouse to, one should always try to be the best spouse to whoever one is married to even as this person changes.

Purpose of Marriage

This leads to the purpose of marriage. The purpose of marriage is to glorify God, and to beautify both husband and wife through each other's love. Marriage has a twofold purpose, one vertical and one horizontal. Here vertical means divine, and horizontal means having to do with human nature. Marriage has vertical and horizontal ties because of the nature of wedding vows, which will be further discussed in the next chapter. How marriage glorifies God is discussed in the next paragraph, first the beautification of spouses will be discussed.

As has already been stated, part of love is willing the good for the beloved. As a Christian this means helping the beloved become a better person and to become more Christ-like. Furthermore, Merton says: "Love is our true destiny. We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone—we find it with another. We do not discover the secret of our lives merely by study and calculation in our own isolated meditations. The meaning of our life is a secret that has to be revealed to us in love, *by the one we love*" (Merton 27). One's spouse helps one find his true calling. This is part of willing the good for one's spouse. Since the marriage relationship is the deepest human relationship that exists, the lover has the best insight into what his spouse's strengths and weaknesses are. One's own view of himself is biased, but his spouse can see his character more clearly. This allows for one's spouse to help instigate the greatest change in oneself. One's sins, virtues, adeptness, ignorance, and tendencies can be best seen by the person who is with him in his true state most often: his spouse. The good that one is married to can will to his beloved is thus a great good. Because of this closeness to his spouse, the lover has a duty to help form his beloved into the best person possible. In a way God

allows for one's spouse to help in the sanctification process. Keller agrees: "What keeps the marriage going is your commitment to your spouse's holiness. You're committed to his or her beauty. You're committed to his greatness and perfection. You're committed to her honesty and passion for the things of God. That's your job as a spouse" (Keller 135). Again, the focus of marriage is the beloved. By focusing on the good of the beloved, the good of the marriage is preserved. Thus, the beautification of the beloved is one of the major purposes of marriage.

The other purpose of marriage is the way marriage glorifies God by pointing to Jesus' relationship with the Church. The New Testament uses marriage to describe Jesus and the church, and vice versa. Jesus in the gospels says: "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son" (Matthew 22:2). Here in this parable God is the king preparing a wedding banquet for Jesus. The wedding guests that are chosen are the Church.¹⁵ Jesus is using marriage to describe the things of God. On the other hand, Paul uses this connection in order to explain marriage:

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself (Ephesians 5:21-28)

¹⁵This is how I interpret the parable.

Paul uses Jesus' relationship with the Church in order to explain marriage. Here the husband is as Christ and the wife is as the Church. There is a significant relationship here. It is no coincidence that marriage is both explained by Jesus' relationship with the Church, and used in order to explain Jesus' relationship with the Church. Both marriage and Jesus' relationship with the Church clarify each other. Therefore one's marriage has more impact than just loving one's spouse (which is a huge impact - in itself): it affects how those outside of one's marriage understand God. Keller similarly explains this in his chapter called The Secret of Marriage: "If God had the gospel of Jesus's salvation in mind when he established marriage, then marriage only 'works' to the degree that approximates the pattern of God's self-giving love in Christ... This is the secret—that the gospel of Jesus and marriage explain one another. That when God invented marriage, he already had the saving work of Jesus in mind" (Keller 43).

It is striking how special marriage is: The most significant human relationship has a clear connection to Jesus's relationship with His believers. Because of this link, a good marriage could be defined as a marriage that represents Jesus' and the Church's relationship well, whereas a bad marriage does not¹⁶. Both the married couple themselves and those around the married couple get a glimpse of what type of love is found between Jesus and the Church. It is a married couple's responsibility to glorify God by appropriately shedding light on this two-way relationship.

The second way marriage glorifies God is by representing the power of covenants with God. In the Bible, God makes covenants to His people. In the Old Testament, God

¹⁶Since humans are fallen, no married couple would always do justice to the relationship between Jesus and the Church, but this is still something that every couple should strive for.

makes a covenant with Abraham to never flood the earth again (Genesis 9:9), and God also makes a covenant to Moses to make Israel his treasured nation (Exodus 19:5). In the New Testament, God's covenant is described as being made through Jesus. Paul quotes Jesus talking about communion: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:25), and Hebrews describes Jesus as "the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance" (Hebrews 9:15). This is important because marriage vows are similar to a covenant. In fact, marriage vows are a unique type of vow with God (this will be explained further in the next chapter). God never breaks his covenants with His people, which is a central aspect of God's relationship with His people. The people of God are also expected to keep covenants with God, though He is faithful to His people even when they are not faithful to Him. Jeremiah quotes God thusly: "The days are coming when I will make a covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them" (Jeremiah 31:32-33). God takes covenants seriously. Keeping covenants is one of the most direct ways God interacts with His people and vice versa. This quote also shows a relationship between covenants and marriage¹⁷. Here God directly opposes breaking covenants and being a husband.

¹⁷As well as the Godhead's relationship to His believers as described by marriage.

The Old Testament shows that keeping covenants and obeying God's commands are a way to fear¹⁸ and love God; "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind" (Ecclesiastes 12:13), and Daniel prays, "Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments" (Daniel 9:4). Marriage is thus also a way to show fear and love for God. By remaining married each spouse is keeping the vow with God, and thus showing love and respect to God. Vows are important to God, so they should also be important to His people. A committed marriage glorifies God by showing love and respect to God, as well as demonstrating the power of God's covenants (as reflected in the wedding vows). For example, a couple that stays married until they die shows more than just great commitment, they show that the power of God was at work in their marriage.

Children

Although this paper is more focused on the commitment aspects of marriage and not the reproductive aspects, it would be remiss to not mention children in the context of marriage. Raising children well is also one of the purposes of marriage. Children are usually most well off (judged by success and mental health) when raised by two parents who are married (Parke 4). A lot of birds are monogamous, and this is thought to be due to the difficulty of raising their young. Similarly, since young humans need a lot of resources and care, spouses should remain married for the sake of their children as well.

¹⁸Fear here is not in the typical sense of being scared, but in the biblical sense of being overwhelmingly awed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, marriage is defined based on wedding vows. It is the commitment of marriage that sets it apart from other romantic relationships. In fact, marriage is the peak of romantic love. It is the height of romantic love because of the exclusivity and longevity that marriage guarantees with vows. Romantic love desires these traits that can only be found in marriage. Because romantic love is the greatest kind of love found among humans, and marriage is the peak of romantic love, marriage is where the greatest human love can be found. It is the deepest kind of relationship that humans can have. The focus of each spouse in marriage should be the other spouse; this in turn will result in the best marriage relationship. In fact, each spouse has the duty to beautify each other since this is one of the purposes of marriage. The other purpose of marriage is to glorify God. The purpose of marriage is integral to this thesis because it makes divorce unjustified. The purpose of marriage is not at all self-centered, though it brings blessings to oneself. How this ties in to vows and divorce will be further explored in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

Permanence of Wedding Vows

Introduction

Earlier it was said that marriage vows are what distinguish marriage from other romantic relationships, and what makes marriage the fulfillment of romantic love. In this chapter the topic of marriage vows will be reviewed in greater detail. Vows and covenants will be defined, and differentiated from general promises. Wedding vows and their contents will then be discussed. After this it will be shown why couples should not divorce.

Nature of Vows

Firstly, vows and covenants are similar, but both vows and covenants are different from promises. Covenants are absolutely binding. Vows are absolutely binding unless God releases one from the vow. Promises however are not absolutely binding. Promises are made by people, to people. For example, person A can promise person B to meet person B for coffee. However imagine that person A breaks his foot, and cannot make it to coffee. Person B can release person A from this promise, and person A would no longer be obligated¹⁹. Person B of course does not have to release person A, in which case person A would break the promise by not going²⁰.

¹⁹It is interesting to consider whether one can release himself from a self-made promise, however this is beyond the scope of this paper.

One cannot be released from a covenant, and cannot be released from a vow unless God allows. Both covenants and vows are made between people and God. Covenants are made between God and His people. Both God and His people agree to the terms. Such is the case with the covenants between God and Abraham, or certain covenants between God and the Israelites. Since covenants are made with God, they should not be broken. God does not break His end of the covenant, and expects His people to uphold their end of the covenant. It is easy to imagine a scenario where God released one from a covenant, however this does not happen. Since God has perfect knowledge and is perfectly good it does not make sense for God to make a covenant that He would break. For He would know if He would eventually have to break the covenant, and thus would not make it in the first place. Also, there is no example where God releases His people from a covenant. God forgives His people for breaking their covenant, but does not release them from it. He also always keeps His end of the covenant. So this distinguishes covenants from promises; one cannot be released from a covenant since it is upheld by God, whereas one can be released from a promise since it held by a human. This in fact distinguishes promises from both covenants and vows; promises do not involve God, whereas both covenants and vows do.

Vows are different from covenants because vows are made from people to God. God makes covenants with His people, but He does not make vows with His people. Rather one can make a vow to God, but God is not involved in the terms of the vow²¹.

²⁰In this particular situation it could be argued that it would be person B who is morally wrong for not releasing person A from the promise, and not person A for not going to coffee.

²¹Or not in the same way.

For example in the Old Testament Jephthah vows to sacrifice whatever walks out of his door first in exchange for victory over the Ammonites. God did not set the terms of this vow, but Jephthah did. However Jephthah was still bound by God to fulfill his vow unless God released him from it²². Vows are more sacred than promises, as are covenants, because they are made to God. Neither covenants nor vows should be taken lightly.

Marriage vows are unique in that they are made between two people and God. They are also unique because God does indeed enter into the terms of wedding vows. This is evidenced by Jesus saying: “Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Matthew 19:6). In this way wedding vows are similar to covenants²³. Most vows are made from one group to God, however wedding vows are made between God and two groups (each spouse being a “group”)²⁴. Here each lover makes a vow with God and his spouse to be with his spouse till death parts them. Keller comments, “Why do we say that marriage is the most deeply covenantal relationship? It is because marriage has both strong horizontal *and* vertical aspects to it” (Keller 86). Here horizontal means human related and vertical means God related. The spouses not only promise to one another to love each other until death, they also vow this to God. On top of the horizontal aspect of the vows between spouses, there is another horizontal layer to wedding vows.

²²It is possible for God to release people from their vows if He so chooses. This can be done directly through God or maybe even through the Church (by which I mean the group of people covered in Jesus’s salvation) if God allows. Also vows to do wrong things should be considered null and void since God would not uphold them in the first place. Perhaps Jephthah’s vow falls in this category.

²³Wedding vows are still not covenants because God is not as directly involved in the terms of the vows. God does indeed join couples together if He agrees with the marriage (otherwise it would not be a marriage in the first place), but he does not specify anything further from His end as He would with a covenant.

²⁴The spouses can also be regarded as one group or “one flesh” but each spouse also make vows to each other in the presence of God during wedding vows.

Marriage vows are usually spoken in front of the community gathered that are celebrating the wedding. This community also helps hold the spouses accountable to each other. Although no aspect of promise is made with the community, the community members are witnesses to the vows and thus help keep the spouses accountable to each other. Notice that even if each spouse no longer wants to remain married and the community no longer supports the couple, the couple is still bound by God to remain married.

In this context it is clear that atheists cannot be married in the same way. Rather their union is a reflection of what true marriage is, but merely a legal version. Atheists would not be bound by God to remain married, but only by law²⁵.

Content of Vows

Now that the nature of wedding vows has been reviewed, the content of vows will be considered. It should be clear by what was said above that the wedding vows are by nature a promise from one spouse to the other, and from each spouse to God. When the Pharisees initially ask Jesus if one can divorce his wife for any reason, Jesus says, “Haven’t you read that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” (Matthew 19:4-6). Jesus also claims that marriage does not continue in heaven (Matthew 22:30). Thus the content of the vow should state the promises of remaining together till “death do us part” and being exclusively faithful to one’s spouse since spouses are joined man and woman as one

²⁵Law is not nearly as strong as a vow upheld by God. Especially since divorce is legal.

flesh. These statements are usually answered by an “I do” to the priest’s questions. These are the only necessary parts of the vows; any other part is optional and specific to each pair of spouses. The promise of exclusive faithfulness till death before God is what makes a marriage a marriage, and thus those promises are necessary in the vows. These vows do not necessarily need to be said out loud as long as each spouse understands that they commit themselves to these vows before God.

Circumstances of Permissible Divorce

There are certain circumstances where God does allow divorce, although there is much debate over which circumstances are permissible for divorce. In Matthew Jesus says, “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (Matthew 5:31-32). The question of course is what does “sexual immorality” mean. Some Christians define sexual immorality as unfaithfulness. Other Christians argue that this term refers to marrying one’s sibling (accidental or not), in which case such a marriage would not be a marriage in the first place, and thus an annulment would be necessary. There are also other arguments in between these two theses.

For the sake of this paper, one does not need to know exactly what this “sexual immorality” means. Let it be granted that there is indeed certain case(s) where divorce is permissible. There is still never a good moral reason for one to divorce *his spouse*. It is God who joins male and female in marriage, and no one should break this bond²⁶. In the

²⁶Only God Himself can release a couple from their marriage vows.

Bible there is an image of the spouses becoming one unit, particularly one flesh. A whole is almost always better when all of its parts are attached. Paul says, “To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife” (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). It is interesting that Paul does not give an exception here²⁷.

Why One Should Never Divorce

The main argument of this paper is that, although it may be legally permissible in some circumstances, one morally should never divorce his spouse in any circumstance. Here should does not mean what is required but what is the morally best option. The reasons why one should never divorce his spouse are the permanence of love, the nature of the wedding vows, and the purpose of marriage. Although one is not always legally required to do the virtuous action, one morally *should* always do the virtuous action. Such is the case with any great virtue. For example say person A sees that person B is about to be hit by a car. Person A has the chance to save person B at the cost of his own life. Person A is not required to save person B, in fact, for the sake of argument, let it be the case that Person A not saving person B would not be a vicious action but would fall into the grey area of neither virtue nor vice. However if person A did save person B it would be one of the greatest acts of love. For as was quoted above, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). From the Christian perspective person A ideally would risk his life for person B. Person A would be following the

²⁷It is not an exception that one should not remarry after divorce. Rather it just shows that not only is divorce a sin, but remarrying after divorce, or remarrying a divorced woman is an additional sin.

example of Christ, and living out the life virtue. Such actions would benefit his soul eternally though he would die. Although this is an extreme case, it makes the point. Marriage is a hard but glorious union. Although it might not be easy to follow one's wedding vows, and there might even be a time when it was permissible to break the vows, ideally one morally should always uphold his wedding vows.

First let us return to the fact that one should never stop loving another once he chooses to love the other person. In the first chapter it was said that love should not cease, but the type of union can change. However marriage is a union that cannot change. Like the parent child union, there is a base union of the love that does not change no matter what. Even if a parent or child changes they still relate to each other as a parent and child, and thus the base union does not change. Marriage is similar to this familial love union, except marriage has an even stronger aspect of choice. One cannot choose who one's parents are, or even who one's kids are. One can only choose to love his parent or child. However in the marriage union, one can choose who his spouse is. The initial choice of one's spouse is completely voluntary, but once one chooses his spouse he can no longer unmake this choice. After the consummation of the wedding vows, spouses are one flesh and have an even stronger bond than the parent-child bond. So not only can a person not stop loving his spouse, but this person cannot stop loving this person *as his spouse*²⁸. It makes sense that the deepest interpersonal human relationship has this type of permanence. It is based upon choice, but it has guaranteed permanence by the help of God. Thus the nature of love itself gives a baseline of why

²⁸Until he or his spouse dies. In which case he would still love whoever his spouse was, but no longer as his spouse.

spouses never stop loving each other, but the marriage vows are what justifies not divorcing.

Again the nature of wedding vows makes it so that one morally should not divorce his spouse. As was said above, one can be released from a promise but not a vow. Even if the lover and his spouse both want to get divorced, they are held to their vows by God. Thus they should stay married for God's glory if not for each other. God joins together spouses in the sacrament of marriage as one flesh and they should not break apart no matter how they feel. Thus because of their vows, spouses should always try to be loving to each other and rekindle the flames of love even when they do not feel like it. Love at its core is a choice, but complete love is accompanied by fondness and affection and other such feelings that are typically thought of as love. So, one has a duty to always love one's spouse as one's spouse. However as mentioned above there are certain cases when spouses may be released from their vows. In order to look at why they should still not divorce one must return to the purpose of marriage.

The purpose of marriage makes it so that one should not divorce his spouse. In the second chapter it was stated that the purpose of marriage is to glorify God, and to beautify both husband and wife through each other's love. One of the ways that marriage glorifies God is by demonstrating how God loves his people and how Jesus loves the Church. As Hosea recounts, "The Lord said to me, 'Go show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another man and is an adulteress. Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes' " (Hosea 3:1). God had Hosea marry a promiscuous woman so that Hosea could demonstrate God's love for the Israelites. God continues to be faithful to His people even

when they are unfaithful to him, and God keeps His covenants even when His people disobey. In order to glorify God and show how deep His love is for us, one should stay married to his spouse even when one's spouse is unfaithful. For marriage is supposed to demonstrate how God loves His people and how Jesus loves the Church. Jesus also sacrificed His life for His bride so that he could bring her back to him even though she was not faithful. Thus God has set the example of not "divorcing" His people even for "sexual immorality," and with God's grace one can and should do the same for his spouse. Imagine how powerful it is to witness spouses remaining together even through infidelity or other troublesome circumstances. This shows God's power and love in a tangible way. Thus spouses who remain together despite circumstances that usually lead to divorce demonstrate God's love and power even more so than the typical "happy couple". Since glorifying God is the purpose of marriage, and not divorcing glorifies God, couples should not divorce.

In addition to the glory of God, marriage is also meant to beautify one's spouse and this is another reason why one should not divorce his spouse. One's focus in marriage is his spouse, not himself. People usually go through divorce because they believe that it is the best course of action for themselves, or even the best course of action for their spouse. However this is not the correct way to view marriage. Each spouse should do what is best for the other. It is one's duty to beautify one's spouse and make the spouse a better person. This is the special duty that the lover has to his spouse, for he is the one who is best suited to beautify his beloved. By remaining together one can best love and beautify his spouse. God joins the couple together and places the duty on each spouse to help each other flourish under Him. By getting divorced one is deserting his

post so to speak. Divorce cannot help one beautify his spouse. By getting a divorce both spouses are no longer in the needed position to best help each other. It is the unique job of the spouse to help the other spouse in the way that marriage allows. Only a married person can love his spouse in the deepest way possible: as an embodied soul. A married person has a front row seat to his spouse's life. He can best see the strengths and flaws of his spouse, and thus can best help his spouse flourish. Getting a divorce gets rid of this advantageous position that one has to help his spouse. Therefore divorce thwarts the purpose of marriage in a two-fold manner. First it does not glorify God, and second it does not help beautify one's spouse.

A good counter argument to the last paragraph could be: what if it is best for one's spouse that his spouse no longer remains with him, then the couple should get a divorce. However it is never in the spouse's best interest to get a divorce. If there are no occurring circumstances of sexual immorality, then by getting a divorce the couple would be breaking their vows with God. Since it is a Christian's foremost duty to love God, it would not be good for the spouse to break his covenant with God. It would be better for the spouse to suffer in the marriage but remain obedient to God, than to stop suffering by getting a divorce and break the vows made in the presence of God. Thus getting a divorce could never be best for one's spouse in this case.

There is the remaining case where sexual immorality has occurred and consequently divorce might be permissible in this case. Even here divorce would not be the best course of action²⁹. As argued above the couple staying married would best

²⁹ This case is different from the case of a marriage that was never valid in the first place, such as the case of marrying a sibling. In an illegitimate marriage the people who try to marry are not actually spouses, and

glorify God, and thus would be the most loving action to God. It is best for each spouse to love God to the fullest, and staying married aids in this pursuit. The only case in which divorce would be the best course of action would be if it was the most loving action to God and one's spouse, and if it best glorified God and best beautified the spouse. As has been shown, no such case exists.

Separation

This leads to the question of what should occur if a couple remaining married does bring harm to the spouse(s). If the problem is the proximity to the other person then separation could be a temporary solution. Separation entails the spouses living apart for a period of time while remaining faithfully married. The goal is to relieve tension in the household while trying to reestablish living together in community. If a couple is living in separation then each spouse should be seeking to end the separation as soon as possible. One should only separate from one's spouse if it is the best course of action for this person's spouse. Instances when separation should occur will be further reviewed in the next chapter.

With the definition of marriage that has been laid out, true divorce is only possible if God allows the couple to not be bound together. A merely legal divorce would not be a true divorce, and this is why Jesus says remarrying³⁰ would be a sin. Legal divorce falls under the case of separation. Any couple who legally divorces should

this divorce does not apply. However if the marriage is null and void because it is inappropriate then the couple should separate.

³⁰Remarrying someone who is not the original spouse.

come back together as soon as possible (not necessarily under the law), and should remain faithful to each other.

Conclusion

Thus vows give marriage its special place among human relationships. Only through vows made before God can humans experience such an unconditional relationship. One cannot be released from his wedding vows by his spouse, but can only by the permission of God. The only case mentioned in the Bible where divorce is permissible is what Jesus refers to as “sexual immorality.” The meaning of this phrase is debated, but this seems to be the only case in which a couple would be released from their wedding vows. However even in the case where a genuinely married couple would be allowed to divorce, it would be best if they remained married. This is because remaining married best glorifies God and helps the spouse flourish as a human being. Even in cases when marriage does not help the spouse flourish, it still honors God to remain married, and thus the marriage should stay intact. In these cases where remaining married is harmful to the spouse separation is a last resort that couples can use to help restore their marriage. This is a hopefully only a temporary solution, as both spouses should seek reunion.

CHAPTER FOUR

Controversial Examples and Annulment

Introduction

Now that it has been shown why a couple should never divorce, controversial cases will be reviewed. Specifically the cases of abuse, infidelity, unequally yoked partners, and the when both spouses desire to divorce will be reviewed. In all of these cases the couple should remain together. After this annulment will be briefly reviewed.

Abuse

A couple should remain married even when one spouse is abusive. If one spouse is abusing the other, this is not grounds for divorce. First notice that neither physical nor verbal abuse would fall under the definition of sexual immorality³¹. The couple would still be bound by vows, and thus should not divorce. The spouse that is suffering the abuse should not think about divorce based on his own suffering, but rather he should stay married for the sake of his beloved. This is not to say that the spouse undertaking the abuse should not care for his own well-being. However, his own well-being is not grounds for divorce. In cases of abuse, separation might be the best option until the

³¹Perhaps rape might. It is debated about whether or not rape can occur within marriage. It seems likely that rape can occur within marriage since each act of consummation should be consensual. If rape does fall under the sexual immorality case a couple should still remain married. This follows from the logic in the paragraph below.

abusive behavior ceases³². It is still the case that remaining married would glorify God in a powerful way, and the couple is still bound by vows.

Infidelity

A couple should remain married even if one spouse (or both) commits adultery. The case where a spouse is unfaithful could fall under the exception of sexual immorality. If it does then it would be permissible for the couple to divorce each other. If not then the couple would still be bound by vows and should not divorce. However, even in situation a where divorce is permissible, the couple should remain together.

In fact staying together despite infidelity is one of the best ways to shine light on God's relationship with His people. In the Bible unfaithfulness is used often to describe God's people turning away from Him, or worshipping other gods. God stays faithful to His people despite their infidelity. Since there is a unique relationship between marriage and how God relates to His people, remaining married despite infidelity is a powerful way to portray God's love. Thus remaining married glorifies God, because it demonstrates the power and completeness of His love. This in itself is enough justification to remain married. In addition to this, remaining married is further justified by helping beautify the cheating spouse. When the unfaithful one recognizes that his spouse is not leaving him it conveys a deep life-changing love. It is easy to say that one will love another forever, but it is another thing to show it. This type of love adds to the

³²This is assuming that the abusive behavior does cease. It is possible that the abusive behavior never ceases, in which case the couple might need to remain separated, but the spouse should always be hoping for a time where the separation ends.

self-worth and transformation of the unfaithful spouse. This is because this type of love mirrors God's perfect love. Thus a couple should not divorce based upon infidelity.

Unequally Yoked Spouses

A couple should not divorce even if they are unequally yoked. Here unequally yoked means that one spouse is a believer and the other is not. In the New Testament Paul says,

If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband... But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? (1 Corinthians 12-16).

Under no circumstance should the Christian divorce the unbelieving spouse. Firstly, the believing spouse made his vows before God³³. He is thus bound by his promises and must not divorce unless God releases him. Besides his vows, the believing spouse is called to remain married to the unbelieving spouse because of the great good it brings to the unbelieving spouse. In this case, more than almost any other case is the believing spouse called to the beautification of his spouse. This is because the unbelieving spouse is sanctified by the believing spouse as Paul said. By remaining married both spouses are sanctified, but if they divorce the unbelieving spouse is no longer sanctified. Thus the

³³Here vows are not referring to wedding vows since wedding vows include both spouses vowing union under God. Rather in this case one spouse is still vowing to God to remain faithful to the other spouse, but the other spouse is not making a vow but maybe only a promise. However, it still seems to be the case that God makes the unequally yoked partners one since the unbeliever is sanctified.

believing spouse would be both fulfilling his vows and fulfilling the purpose of marriage by remaining married to the unbelieving spouse. Since the unbelieving spouse does not believe in God, the unbelieving spouse would not have made vows before God. Rather an unbelieving spouse's vows would be a promise to the believing spouse, which the believing spouse could release him from. Thus the unbelieving spouse may divorce the believing spouse, though it would be to the unbeliever's detriment. The believing spouse should do everything in his power to stay married to the unbeliever, but if the unbeliever insists on divorce then the believer may release the unbeliever in order to "live in peace" with the unbelieving spouse. Thus being unequally yoked is not a justification for divorce, but the unbeliever may file a divorce.

It is interesting to consider whether the believer may remarry if the unbeliever leaves. If God indeed joins the unequally yoked couple as one flesh, then the believer should not remarry unless the unbelieving spouse dies. For the couple would still be joined as one flesh even if the unbeliever leaves, and thus the believing spouse would commit adultery by remarrying. In this case the believing spouse should dedicate his life to God like a celibate would while remaining open to the possible return of the unbelieving spouse. However if God does not join the unequally yoked couple for the very reason that they are unequally yoked then the believer may remarry. For if the couple was never one flesh under God then the believer does not sin by remarrying. It seems as though God does make the couple one flesh since the unbeliever is sanctified by the believing spouse. However, this question is beyond the scope of this paper.

Couple Desiring Divorce

Even if both spouses desire divorce they should not divorce. This seems silly. It is easier to understand why spouses should remain together when at least one desires to do so. However divorce does not depend upon the feeling of the spouses. It could be the case that each of the spouses would be “better off” if they were not bound to each other in marriage³⁴. However it is each of the spouse’s duty to keep the vows they made before God and each other. Each spouse should work towards desiring to be in union with each other again. By keeping their vows the couple better glorifies God. Also in the long run they help beautify each other since each spouse is helping the other be obedient to God over their own feelings. Thus remaining married honors the wedding vows and fulfills the purpose of marriage. This couple should not get divorced.

Annulment

Now annulment will be defined and differentiated from divorce. An annulment is a declaration that a marriage was never valid. It does not end a marriage because the marriage never existed in the first place. This happens if God does not join a couple together as one flesh. This is usually understood to be the case when family members try marry, or other cases where marriage would be void. Thus a divorce ends a marriage but an annulment claims that the marriage never existed. If a couple gets annulled this is not problematic. This is because the vows would hold no weight if God did not agree to the vows. The couple would have no duty to each other as spouses. In this case the couple

³⁴“Better off” is in quotes because in truth each spouse is better off when the spouse does not break the vows made to God.

should either get officially married if possible, or separate. Each partner is able to remarry without committing adultery.

Conclusion

After reviewing all the negative things that can occur within marriage one may be thinking that the character Garcin in Sartre's play *No Exit* was right when he exclaims, "hell is— other people!" (Sartre 45). However marriage was meant to show human beings a glimpse into heaven. Although many things can go wrong in a marriage, God's grace allows for a couple to remain together and continue loving each other. In this way marriage reflects God's perfect love. This type of unconditional love is a supernatural thing to partake in. It not only allows the married couple to better understand how Jesus relates to the Church and how God in general relates to His people, but it also allows those around the married couple to understand the same things. A good marriage is not an easy endeavor, but it is a worthy endeavor. It is no wonder that it is difficult for fallen humans to partake in something that both explains Jesus' relationship with the Church and is explained by Jesus' relationship with the Church. However difficult things are usually the things worth pursuing.

It seems very impractical to remain married in hard circumstances. But Keller explains that, "longitudinal studies demonstrate that two-thirds of those unhappy marriages out there will become happy within five years if people stay married and do not get divorced"³⁵ (Keller 19). Picking one's spouse carefully is important, yet no matter whom one chooses as his spouse, his spouse will change. This is human nature.

³⁵Here Keller sites Linda J. Waite, the American Values Institute 2002, *Does Divorce Make People Happy?*

No one remains exactly the same. One cannot expect his spouse to be the same now as in fifty years. The only way to remain married is to keep one's vows even during the toughest of times.

Imagine how powerful it would be if Christians remained married to a much greater extent than non-Christians did. This would show the power and love of God in a way that few things could. Thankfully God gives grace to those who are married in order to be able to achieve such a great type of love. God also forgives those who have undergone divorce and remarried. This paper is not a criticism of those who have undergone divorce, but is rather an investigation into what makes marriage the greatest form of relationship that humans can experience.

To summarize difficult circumstances are not justification for divorce. Couples should remain married despite committing abuse, committing infidelity, being unequally yoked, or desiring divorce. This is because of the commitment entailed in vows, and the two-fold purpose of marriage. By remaining married couples keep their promise to God. They also glorify God and each spouse helps beautify the other.

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