

Jacob who practiced polygamy. Through Moses, God even provided a divorce law to limit the damage caused by people's hardness of heart (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

### **Whom God Has Joined**

Imperfect as our marriages are, God has given humanity a minimum standard aside from which a relationship cannot be called a marriage. That minimum is the exclusive, publicly expressed union of a man and a woman who pledge to remain faithful to each other for life (Matthew 19:5-6).

God does not, however, require all of the customs many people think are necessary for becoming united in marriage—for example, elaborate church weddings. Indeed, throughout most of Christian history, couples have married without a church ceremony; church weddings only became commonplace among Christians in the sixteenth century.

In Western society, romantic love, “falling in love,” is generally thought to be the primary impetus for marrying; and “no longer being in love,” is often cited as the reason to divorce and marry someone else. Strange as it may seem to people living in North America, romantic love, according to Scripture, is not a prerequisite for marriage. The Bible does celebrate romantic and erotic love (cf. Song of Songs), but it never elevates such love to being essential for marriage to take place. Before the seventeenth century, romantic love was thought to be a hindrance to establishing a good marriage; practical considerations were thought to be more important. Christians who practice arranged marriages still subscribe to such a view. Believers must not overvalue romantic love, lest they make it into an idol. Romance alone cannot sustain a marriage for life, but Christ-like love can (Ephesians 5:21).

### **Modeling Marriage**

What should Christians, who represent Jesus in culture, do when marriages fall short of God's standards? Most importantly, believers who are married should do everything they can to model the excellent and delightful way of being married that God designed. They can also invite other couples to take one step at a time towards practicing marriage as God intended. However, some situations pose particular challenges for Christians.

### **When a marriage partner is unfaithful...**

The Bible identifies unfaithfulness as a valid reason for divorce (Matthew 19:9) but does not regard divorce as the necessary or the only possible response. God forgives the repentant. To offer grace is to imitate God. God can bring healing and forgiveness to such situations.

### **When a partner is intolerant or abusive...**

For the sake of peace, it may sometimes be appropriate for a believing spouse to separate from an unbelieving partner who is unwilling to live with that believer (1 Corinthians 7:12-16). Similarly, for the sake of peace and personal safety, separation is an act of mercy for a person who is being abused by his or her spouse.

### **When Christians disagree with Canadian marriage laws...**

Many Christians differ with aspects of the Canadian government's current approach towards marriage. At the time of this writing, the Canadian government's approach to the diversity of marriage practices retains only three elements of biblical marriage: that it be exclusive, publicly expressed (i.e., lawful) and the union of two people. This approach no longer requires either a lifelong pledge or a heterosexual union, and therefore falls short of God's good design for marriage.

Separating the church ceremony and the legal ceremony was the practice through most of church history and is still the custom in some countries. As a protest against the diversity of marriage practices permitted within Canadian law, some Christians advocate separating the church ceremonies from legal ceremonies. To honour God's good purposes for marriage, churches in Canada still do well to observe the legal requirements of marriage. These legalities give public recognition to marriages. Moreover, laws governing marriage help to restrain sins such as abuse, economic exploitation and desertion. Laws also set out legal grounds for separations and divorces.

God has instituted marriage as one of the ways in which he is to be portrayed in this world until Jesus returns. Marriages are meant to mirror God's character—his love, faithfulness, creative power, oneness in diversity—and God's covenant relationship with his people. Let believers therefore model marriage in ways that draw others into the community of faith.

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# A More Excellent Way

## Christian Marriage in the World



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Canadians have diverse ways of practicing marriage in their pluralistic society. Marriages are lifelong or temporal, legalized or common-law, same-sex or opposite-sex, with one spouse or a succession of spouses, for the purpose of procreation or for other reasons, the result of a romance or the result of parental arrangements. How then are Jesus' disciples to understand and to practice marriage in a culture with so much diversity, and in a culture where there is no longer a consensus on the meaning of marriage?

### A More Excellent Way

The Bible points to God's purposes for marriage. God intended marriage to reflect God's image in the world and to illustrate God's loving covenant relationship with his people.

God designed marriage to be a means by which men and women image God as partners (Genesis 2:15-25). God, the perfectly joyful unity of Father, Son and Spirit, created humans as male and female so that together they would portray God in the world (Genesis 1:26-28). Men and women, both single and married, represent God when they work together for God's kingdom on earth (Romans 16:3-7). As Jesus underlined in Matthew 19:6, marriage is a particularly blessed example of such fellowship.

Marriage's other purpose, to exemplify God's loving covenant relationship with humanity, is also taught throughout Scripture. The marriage covenant between a man and a woman parallels God's covenant relationship with creatures made in his own image. The Old Testament contains a record of God's ongoing covenant making, a covenant relationship that benefited all people (Genesis 9:1-17; 12:1-3). The New Testament provides a record of how Jesus, the Son of God, gave his life to make possible a new covenant between God and humanity. According to Scripture the church is "the bride of Christ" (Ephesians 5:32 and Revelation 19:7), a term that includes all who have entered the covenant Jesus made possible. In Ephesians 5:21-33 Paul states explicitly that the marriage rela-

tionship between a husband and wife is a picture of this loving union between Christ and the church.

In Genesis 1:28 and 9:1, God charged earth's founding couples to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." To have and nurture children within a marriage relationship is a biblical concept that has not been much disputed throughout human history. God created; Adam and Eve procreated. This role of a man and a woman as marriage partners is a sacred trust. Jesus himself came to earth by being born into a home where a mother and father protected him from King Herod, dedicated him in the temple, and took him on their annual trip to Jerusalem (Matthew 2 and Luke 2). To have and lovingly to raise children is a marvelous way of portraying God's nature and covenant, especially when it is done "in the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4)

Based on God's purposes, the Bible sets high standards for marriage. Marriage is to be an exclusive union for life between one man and one woman, publicly recognized, consummated by sexual union, lived as a mutually submissive partnership, and creating an environment for having and raising children. Each component of this design is rooted in God's image and covenant.

**Union:** At its heart, marriage is a union wherein husband and wife become as one. Their oneness images the Trinity and the unity of Christ and his church.

**Exclusivity:** Husband and wife share a fellowship more intimate than their fellowship with anyone else. Such intimacy requires faithfulness. Adultery violates this exclusivity. God earnestly desires faithfulness and deeply rooted friendship with his people (Exodus 20:5 and James 4:5).

**Woman and Man:** Through the entire Bible, God shows that he designed marriage to be heterosexual. The union in marriage of a man and a woman is an expression of the wonderful duality of gender that God created in humanity. "And indeed, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31).

**For Life:** God intended a husband and wife's union to be permanent: "as long as they both shall live" (Romans 7:2-3). The permanence of marriage mirrors Jesus' constancy (Hebrews 13:8), and God's faithfulness towards his covenant people (2 Timothy 2:13). However, the marriage union is only for this life, not for life after the resurrection (Matthew 22:30).

**Public Recognition:** The precedent for public recognition of marriages is found in Scripture—for example, in Genesis 29:21-23 and John 2:1-11. As in covenants generally, a marriage requires witnesses. Publicly recognized marriages

let everyone know that two people have made a solemn commitment to each other and are henceforth off limits to others seeking a partner. For the Christian there is a parallel: a believer's covenant relationship with God is not merely a private, inner reality, but is expressed publicly in baptism and then in a life of visible discipleship (1 John 3:18).

**Monogamy:** The Bible says, "Therefore a man shall leave father and mother and be joined to his wife" (Matthew 19:5). Clearly, this is a description of monogamy, not polygamy.

**Sexual Expression:** Sexual intercourse both establishes and sustains the marriage union. In sexual expression within marriage there is a depth of intimacy unparalleled in any other relationship. Sexual union is a picture of the mysterious union between Christ and his church (Ephesians 5: 31-32).

**Children:** God intended children to be born and raised in the context of marriages. Couples who are willing and able to have children, either by birth or adoption, imitate God himself, who is spoken of in "The Lord's Prayer" (Matthew 6:9) and in many other passages of Scripture as our Father (Ephesians 3:14-15).

**Mutually Submissive Partnership:** Mutuality and forgiveness make a marriage union supple, so that it will not snap under its inevitable changes and shortcomings (1 Corinthians 7:3-5). In the mutuality of marriage, each spouse seeks the other's good; each needs the other (Genesis 2:18 and 1 Corinthians 11:11). Arranged marriages also require this kind of mutual love. Mutual submission (i.e., allowing oneself to be influenced by one's spouse) is a mark of the Holy Spirit's indwelling (Ephesians 5:18, 21). Mutual forgiveness in marriage depicts God's covenant with humanity—a covenant based entirely on forgiveness through Jesus Christ.

### All Have Sinned and Fall Short

Although our pluralistic culture permits many different practices of marriage, God calls all husbands and wives to the more excellent way of marriage described in Scripture. Even when marriages fall short of God's design—and all marriages do—they still reflect aspects of God's character and God's covenant. Jesus taught that in marriage two people are joined by God (Mark 10:9); therefore, even imperfect marriages bear the imprint of God's image.

Thankfully, God extends grace to marriages that regrettably only reflect his image like a tarnished mirror. God forgave David when he confessed his adultery with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:13). God extended grace to husbands such as