



The Reflector

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Marriage, Cultural Considerations, and Civil Authorities

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There is no question that civil authorities recognize marriages that God would never approve. Especially since “same sex marriages” seem to be gaining recognition by civil authorities, we are hearing some rumblings among Christians to consider the role for civil authority irrelevant to marriage in God’s eyes. In other words, to be a God-approved marriage, civil sanction is not needed – just a private agreement “before God” between the two to be married. This is very slippery slope to embark upon.

Marriage is a God-ordained relationship that is as old as man. This is revealed in the statement, *“Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.”* (Genesis 2:24). Jesus appealed to this statement as a basis for his teaching on marriage and divorce. A lot is revealed in this statement and Jesus’ endorsement of it. Marriage was intended for all humanity, not just for those who would later be designated as “God chosen people” – Israelites or Christians. Marriage, as ordained of God in the beginning, was between a man and his *wife*. “Wife” is singular and feminine. No room for same-sex marriages or polygamy in this statement. It is later revealed that marriage is a “covenant” between the parties (Malachi 2:14).

When a culture recognizes “adultery” or “fornication” it presupposing a violation of a relationship recognized by that culture as marriage. It is much more than what the couple may consider as “being married,” it is what the culture recognizes as being married. While God ordained the relationship of marriage for all of mankind, no

matter in what culture or place they might live, he did not specify a universal method for implementing the marriage covenant – leaving that to each culture to work out.

Thus, the concept of marriage is pretty much universal among all the decedents of Adam, even though all are not concerned with following God’s will in the matter, indicating the concept was likely passed down from generation to generation going back to the time when God first instituted it. As previously noted, it is a covenant. A covenant is more than a mere agreement of the parties. It is a solemn agreement that requires ratification (Gal. 3:15 NASV). In reading all Scripture, it is evident that methods of ratifying covenants have varied from culture to culture and nation to nation. This is true of the marriage covenant. In some early societies, it was said to be ratified by the couple “jumping over a broom.” In our culture, the covenant is ratified by meeting the requirements of civil government to which we are to submit (Rom 13:1-5).

No one that I know claims that God approves every marriage covenant that the civil powers or cultural norms might ratify. One may marry either with or without God’s approval and still be married according to the Scriptures. Herod’s marriage to his brother’s wife violated God’s law, but it was still marriage – “for he had married her.” (Mark 6:17). Jesus in the New Testament did not go into detail as to what was involved in the process of “getting married.” He did not have to. People knew what the marriage customs and cultural requirements that were in their society. What Jesus and his apostles did was to tell who had a right to enter into a

marriage covenant (whatever the process was) with God's approval and that sexual relations outside of marriage is either fornication or adultery (Heb. 13:5). Nowhere were they told to bypass the customs and processes of their culture in getting married.

One reason I said in the beginning that it is a "slippery slope" is that it will lead to marriages not approved of God nor recognized by society. A couple could decide to "get married" privately by a process of their choosing and start living together. Preachers who buy into this concept could pronounce couples to be husband and wife without the authority or sanction of the state. Congregations would have a time dealing with cases of infidelity because they would have a time determining who were married and who were not.

The fact that some governments and cultures may abuse God's law concerning marriage does not mean that God-approved marriages do not have to be the results of a covenant ratified by the cultural requirements where one lives. Should we oppose same sex marriages? Absolutely! Should we oppose marriages that result in adultery as per Matt. 5:32; 19:9? Absolutely! Should we oppose "shacking up" even though the parties consider themselves to be married? Absolutely! Even if they all are sanctioned by our government. But does that mean that we should abandon the very concept of marriage being a covenant made between two people and ratified by the methods dictated by the culture or government under which they live? I think not! ■

Forgiveness

Tim Haile

Most humans find the idea of forgiveness to be quite appealing. It is comforting to know that wrongs that have been committed against God or one's fellow man can be forgiven. Forgiveness cleanses and cures the guilty conscience, allowing one to focus his concerns upon productive matters of the present and future, not upon the failures of the past.

For many people, guilt can be psychologically and even physically debilitating. A guilty conscience can turn one to depression and even suicide. Many people turn to psychiatrists for help with their

guilt-ridden consciences. And while therapy can be helpful, it cannot provide actual forgiveness. Some seem to think that relief is obtained by distancing themselves from those whom they have wronged. And while out-of-sight is sometimes out-of-mind, memories are still inevitably triggered and the guilt returns. It is better to seek forgiveness from those wronged, rather than just avoid them. Others turn to drugs and alcohol to "drown their sorrows." Ironically, drugs and alcohol actually have the opposite effect. They cause additional problems, such as addiction and other health-related issues, loss of jobs and productivity, interpersonal difficulties, legal troubles...etc. These things may help one to forget his wrongs, at least temporarily, but forgiveness is the only effective way of actually repairing a guilty conscience.

While even non-religious forgiveness (even practiced by atheists) can have a cathartic affect upon human beings, the forgiveness that really matters is that which is given by God. Wrongs committed against others are also committed against God. According to James, to curse one's fellow man is also to curse God, for man is made in the likeness of God (James 3:9). One might obtain forgiveness from a neighbor from whom he stole property, but stealing is also against the law of God (1 Corinthians 6:10). Forgiveness of sin is a divine act that is regulated by divine law, which means that we must turn to Scripture for a full appreciation of the blessing of forgiveness.

What Is Forgiveness?

In answering the disciples' question about how to pray, Jesus taught that forgiveness was an integral component of prayer, and that forgiveness is conditional:

"And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors... For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you" (Matthew 6:12, 14).

The word "debt" is very helpful in defining forgiveness, for forgiveness is the canceling of a debt. In this case, the debt is that of trespassing God's law. The Greek word for "forgive" is *aphiemi*, which is translated in various ways in the New Testament, but the basic meaning is to leave, or

leave behind. When used of sin and guilt, forgiveness involves the canceling of the debt and consequences of sin. In Bible terms, once sin is forgiven it is forgotten. Sin that is forgiven has no more power to condemn the sinner.

In Jeremiah's prophecy of the "new covenant," God said, "...For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jeremiah 31:34). God's "forgiveness" would be thorough and complete. He would "remember" the people's sins against them no more. It would be as though their sins had never been committed in the first place. Other Bible passages emphasize the extent of God's forgiveness:

"As far as the East is from the West, so far does He remove our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12).

"He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:19).

"I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins" (Isaiah 43:25).

"Then Peter said unto them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 2:38).

"Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19).

"And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16).

The idea is that of complete pardon. Forgiveness removes both the guilt and spiritual consequences of sin. {Note - some types of sinful behavior do have physical consequences in addition to the spiritual consequences. Forgiveness will not always relieve a person of the physical consequences of sin. For example: the forgiven thief may still have to serve his time in jail. The forgiveness of sin that is spoken of in Scripture has to do with the spiritual consequences of sin.

The Bible attributes forgiveness of sin to actions of both God and man:

According to Luke 24:47 and Acts 26:18, forgiveness of sins is made possible through the preaching of the gospel. The gospel reveals God's scheme of redemption, including both God's part (grace) and man's part (faith) (Ephesians 2:8). Though there are many more particulars, the basic components of forgiveness are as follows:

The role of Christ in providing a perfect sin-sacrifice - "In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins" (Ephesians 1:7). The animal sacrifices under the Patriarchy and Law, though vital as acts of faith, did nothing to take away sin (Hebrews 9:13, 14; 10:1-4). The blood of the Son of God sufficed to remove sin.

The role of Christ in reentering Heaven in order to fulfill the types of Old Testament sacrifices and to serve as our indestructible High Priest and King (Hebrews 7:22-28; 9:11-28).

The role of man in complying with God's terms of forgiveness: To the unsaved, Peter preached that "remission of sins" would be obtained by those who repented and were baptized (Acts 2:38). He would later cite "belief," along with baptism, as a necessary requirement of forgiveness (Acts 10:43, 47-48). Acts 8:37-38 cites confession, along with baptism (see also Romans 10:9-10). For the child of God who sins, forgiveness is obtained through repentance and prayer (Acts 8:22). These are simple conditions, particularly in view of the tremendous benefits that are obtained through God's grace.

Can I Forgive The Unrepentant?

In short, no! We are not authorized to do what even God won't do. On the cross Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Lk. 23:34). However, God's forgiveness would not come until the sinners met the conditions of salvation. Peter told the crucifiers of Christ that they must "repent and be baptized" in order for their sins to be remitted (Acts 2:38). God's law requires that men repent in order for them to be forgiven. Jesus twice said, "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3, 5). Jesus refuses to forgive (save) those who refuse to repent.

Though there has been a running debate over this question for years, Jesus is quite plain about the practice of forgiving the unrepentant. He said, "Pay

attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in a day, and turns to you seven times, saying ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.” (Luke 17:3, 4).

The word “if” is a term of conditionality. Forgiveness is to be granted upon the condition of repentance, and not before. We should be as God, and desire “that all men come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). We should then stand absolutely ready and willing to forgive those who meet God’s conditions of forgiveness.

Conclusion

Forgiveness means “having no more conscience of sins” (Hebrews 10:2). Being forgiven by a wronged family member or neighbor is comforting and nice, but obtaining a clean conscience is possible only through the precious blood of Christ, who like “a lamb without blemish and without spot,” gave His life “as a ransom for all” (1 Peter 1:19; Matthew 20:28). The significance of Christ’s sacrifice was in His death (Romans 5:6-10). This is where He shed His blood (John 19:34), and through baptism one is “buried into the death” of Christ (Romans 6:3-4). According to Hebrews 9:14, the conscience is cleansed by the blood of Christ, yet Peter said that baptism “is the answer of a good conscience towards God” (1 Peter 3:21). Thus, in baptism one reaches the blood of Christ and obtains a clean conscience. Forgiveness is possible, but it requires that we meet the conditions of divine grace. timlhaile@gmail.com ■

Paul’s Preaching Pattern

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“I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.” (2 Timothy 4:1-2 NKJV)

Those of us who preach need to heed Paul’s solemn charge to the young preacher Timothy. He charges him before God and Jesus Christ to preach in view of the great judgment day. A solemn charge, indeed. He then gives him the pattern for his

preaching.

The source of his preaching: “*the word*.” One preaches the word by reading (or quoting) the text, giving the correct exegesis and making appropriate application.

The three purposes of preaching the word: “*Convince, rebuke, exhort*.” These three words at times seem to have a bit of overlapping in their original meanings, but each has a distinctive shade of meaning.

“*Convince*” (reprove kjv) is to persuade one not convinced of his faults through sound reasoning. “*Rebuke*” is a sharper word and is used of rebuking one for not doing what he knows to do. “*Exhort*” is more positive. It is to urge, encourage, comfort and as we sometimes say, to inspire. All of this is to be done with “longsuffering and teaching.” All preaching should be more than mere proclamation, it should have a teaching quality to it.

Just as preaching the “whole counsel” (Act 20:27) does not mean that it all has to be preached in one session, a given sermon does not have to have all three kinds of preaching in it. It may, and often does, but does not have to. At one time the lesson might focus on convincing, at another time on rebuking and at another time on exhorting. Balance would demand that all three types be included over a reasonable period of time.

Whether one is convincing, rebuking, or exhorting he should remember that *the word is to be the source material for all of preaching*. It is no accident that just prior to Paul’s charge to Timothy he reminds him that the scriptures are the complete source of material for the “man of God” in all elements of his preaching – teaching, reproof, correction and instruction (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Unless the church is fed on this kind of preaching those who are not used to sound doctrine will not develop a taste for it and those that have an appetite for it will lose it over time and drift into apostasy. As Paul put it, “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.” (2 Timothy 4:3-4 NKJV)