

## **Traditional Christian Marriage** **by David Allen White**

The first thing to be said about traditional Christian marriage is that there is no such thing. Marriage did not originate with either Christianity or Judaism. Anthropologists estimate that 90% of all human beings spend some portion of their adult lives in a pair bond of some kind. And of the other 10%, most of them want to.

The Church has always had a lot to say about marriage, who may be married, and under what circumstances. It has always had something to say about people who weren't married, or about people who were married too many times. But what the Church has said about this subject has not always been the same. In the Roman Empire couples were married by a civil magistrate and then had their union blessed at the church door. There were no marriage rites as such in the Church until the year 1000, and marriage was not declared to be a sacrament until 1215. The Church had no involvement in creating the civil state of marriage. In most countries today clergy do not have the authority to perform marriages. The practice is to be married by a civil magistrate and to have a church blessing afterwards. English-speaking countries are a notable exception to this otherwise universal practice.

In the Roman Empire marriage was a civil state, but only for the propertied classes. The primary purpose of marriage was to regularize legitimacy and inheritance, and for the poor and the enslaved there was no civil marriage. They made their own commitments to each other and upheld them the best they could, but the Empire was not interested in regulating them. Neither was the Church when the Church took over the functions of the Empire. Marriage was for the nobility, the wealthy, and those with property.

Marriage remained largely about property until quite recently. A man owned his wife and his child the way he owned his horse and his dog. An unmarried daughter was the property of her father, and at her marriage he passed ownership to her husband. This is the origin of the question in some marriage rites: "Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?" It was important to protect her virginity because, while a man might dally with an experienced woman, he did not marry one. It would cast doubt on the legitimacy of his children. Bearing children and ordering the home were the chief duties of a wife. The advantage to the wife was that it provided security for her in an age where there were no social roles for unmarried women.

Also until quite recent times there was an advantage to having as many children as possible. Before the twentieth century most children died. There were no vaccines, no antibiotics, no clean water, and a child born in the eighteenth century had less than a 50% likelihood of surviving to adulthood. And in an agricultural economy even small children could work on a farm.

Very powerful men, rulers, for example, were not above forcing a son or a daughter into a loveless marriage to cement an alliance between kingdoms. Anglicans know the story of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon.

This is not to say that people didn't marry for love. In all ages some people have married for

love, when they could. In addition, many people who first married for some other reason eventually came to love each other. In cultures where the sexes were strictly segregated, this was more common, since boys and girls couldn't even meet before marriage, let alone fall in love.

The Church blessed existing civil marriages, but didn't create marriage on its own until the Second Millennium, and didn't create marriage for people with no money or property for perhaps another 400 years. But once the Church started marrying everybody, it pretended that it had always done so, and at this point it started branding those who were living together without a formal marriage ceremony as sinners. There's an old saying that in the Catholic Church everything is forbidden until it's required. This is how the Church arrived at the position that sex outside of marriage is a sin. And this is the position that society took with regard to marriage until the 1960s. Many things changed during that decade. The availability of birth control, the counterculture revolution, the need for women to work outside the home, all these things worked together to change the idea of marriage.

We have now reached the point where nobody is quite sure what marriage is. Women do not need men to support them because they can work and support themselves. They do not need men in order to have children, or at least not for more than a few minutes, because they can borrow the services of a male friend or go to a sperm bank. Men have often become unreliable as breadwinners and so women have learned to do without them. The stigma of being a child of divorced or otherwise single parents has all but disappeared. Even when couples want a traditional marriage, the pressures of work make it difficult or impossible. What happens when a wife is offered a better job in another city? Does her husband resign and go with her? Do they commute across country? If they do, how long does that last? What if she, or he, gets lonely? How hard is it to remain faithful when there are so many opportunities to cheat? We haven't yet come to a decision about what a 21<sup>st</sup>-century marriage is supposed to be.

What about same-sex couples? Let's dismiss an once the idea that this is an invention of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Same-sex couples existed in Ancient Greece as well as the Roman Empire, and there are documents to prove it. The Church blessed same-sex couples as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century, though the practice fell into disuse beginning in the 14<sup>th</sup> century in the West, though it continued for a few more centuries in the East. It is sometimes difficult to find documentary evidence, since same-sex couples were usually called "brothers" or "sisters." But beginning in the 14<sup>th</sup> century homosexual practice, which had previously been taken for granted, suddenly came to be regarded as the worst possible sin. From then on, people who were attracted to their own sex learned to hide this attraction by marrying or entering the celibate religious life where their failure to marry would not attract attention. Men could be soldiers, sailors, cowboys, prospectors, whalers, pirates, or outlaws of the Old West, and spend their lives in a single-sex environment. One suspects that they didn't miss women all that much.

In recent years same-sex marriage has been legalized in many countries, including the United States. The Roman Catholic Church not only forbids it for their members, but in the past has spent thousands of dollars in political activity trying to prevent it. The Episcopal Church, which struggled with this issue for many years, now has an authorized blessing of same-sex couples, and uses it to perform legal marriages. Not every priest has to perform a same-sex marriage, but

every diocese must make the service available.