

Toward Marital Holiness as a Christian Value

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ABSTRACT: From a Christian standpoint, marital holiness is a topic that traces its origins back to the very act of creation, as told in the book of Genesis. God is the one who creates the first family, and the expectation thereof is that the resulting relationship between man and woman is characterized by holiness. However, considering the multiplication of contemporary controverted notions of what family is, we ought to ask once again: what holiness means in the context of marriage? This question is addressed in this essay from a biblical perspective. It is argued that the marriage relationship, as intended by the Creator, goes beyond satisfying one's need for a life in companion. It is, in fact, the very means by which the human community, of which the family is its most basic cell, portrays God's image. As such, marital holiness ought to be regarded as a fundamental Christian value.

KEYWORDS: Holiness, marriage, family, Christian values, Christian existence

Introduction

Marriage, as created by God (Genesis 1–2), is the most important institution human society has ever known. It is a universally accepted mode of human association, and as such it represents the very backbone of human civilization. Human beings have specific urges – hunger, thirst, and sex-drive – and human societies have long worked out rules that regulate the ways in which such urges are satisfied. Amongst these, marriage is the institution that creates and regulates social relationships and reciprocal rights between man and woman. It also establishes the rights and the status of children that are born within such relationships. Each society recognizes procedures for creating such relationships and rights. These may include prohibitions, preferences, and prescriptions for deciding when marriage starts and what it entails. It is through the institution of marriage that humans sustain their continuity as a race and attain satisfaction in a socially recognized manner.

The Bible teaches that marriage was designed by God to be the source of great and unspeakable happiness. Yet, as is the case with other aspects of the creation, the purpose and potential of marriage is hindered by sin. Furthermore, the Bible also teaches that happiness is not the first and foremost purpose of marriage. Rather, marriage is about the creation of human communities that, in some way, resemble God (Măcelaru 2021, 596-608). Thus, holiness becomes a precondition of marital relationships, for a God who is utterly holy would be thus represented only within communities characterized by “relational holiness” (Adewuya 2003, 9).

Marriage – Its Nature and Purpose

In the biblical sense, marriage is a covenant in which two Christians, a man and a woman, pledge to live together, to make each other holy before God, as a testimony to Christ (Zhekov 2017). The most important aspect of marriage is the quality of the relationship

developed, founded on love. Attitudes and responsibilities are also important factors in the development of a good marriage. Thus, building a happy marriage is the result of a conscious effort for a good relationship, on the part of both, husband and wife. From this perspective, marriage is a lifelong union, between people bound together by a bond of love, which has spiritual as well as physical and social dimensions.

In the secular world, marriage has been defined in varied ways (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary* 2022), from the traditional view, as the recognized and approved union between a man and a woman who give themselves to one another, with the expectation of a secure and lasting, contractual relationship, recognized by the law, to more controverted definitions, such as the union between a man and a man or between a woman and a woman. Evidently, within the present argument, the biblical prohibition of same-sex relationships (cf. Leviticus 18:22, 20:13) is upheld. Generally speaking, however, nowadays marriage usually begins with a ceremony known as a wedding, which formally unites the marriage partners as well as their respective relatives. This union is secured under the law. The usual roles and responsibilities of the man and woman that engage in such a relationship involve living together, having sexual relations only with one another, sharing economic resources, and being recognized as the parents of their children.

In addition to the above, it seems that the Bible teaches yet another specific purpose for marriage: “that believers might marry and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ’s body” (Baumert 1996, 371). Thus, beyond happiness, sexual expression, the bearing of children, companionship, mutual care and provision, or any other such rationale, marriage is instituted in order to please God the Creator by enabling humans to live a holy life. Ridiculed by many nowadays, holiness remains a principle honored among Christ’s disciples. It is exactly what the Apostle Paul has in view as he writes to the church in Corinth. Confused and seduced by sexual immorality, the Corinthian Christian community had compromised its own ability to represent Christ. Within this context, Paul points to marriage as a means of channeling sexual desire into its proper context, lest believers “burn with passion” and sin against God. (1 Corinthians 7:9). Moreover, in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul uses marriage as a metaphor to speak of the union between Christ and His church. As such, in Paul’s teaching, marriage becomes directly related to the glory of God, the mystery of Christ and the church. The exclusivity and purity of the marriage bond points to the exclusivity and purity of the relationship between Christ and His church.

Moreover, the Scripture teaches us that marriage is a reflection of God Himself (Genesis 1:27, 31). As Baumert describes it, the image of God in this context points to marriage. He says: “when an artist brings forth his or her inner vision in a visible ‘image’, he or she simultaneously makes something of his or her own essence visible. Thus, it is not only in spirit and soul that people resemble God; their body also is such a visible ‘image’; their whole being is fashioned in the image of God” (Baumert 1996, 274). God in His very nature is relational, affirming, gracious, giving and much more. He is Father, Son and Holy Spirit – three in One. If marriage is a reflection of the nature and relational essence of the Trinity, then the love, integrity and wholeness of God is made manifest in the love, integrity and wholeness between spouses. As we embrace the privilege and responsibility of being a reflection of the Trinity, we are assured that He who has called us to reflect His image and likeness will empower and equip us to fulfill the call. This is the “gracious operation of the Holy Spirit, involving our responsible participation, by which he delivers us from the pollution of sin, renews our entire nature according to the image of God, and enables us to live lives that are pleasing to him” (Hoekema 1989, 192).

Many other biblical passages that address the issue of marriage, in both the Old and the New Testament support the argument that marriage is not only designed by the Creator as an arena for human happiness and the continuation of the human race, but also as the arena of God's glory, where the delights and disciplines of marriage point to the purpose for which human beings were made. As such, marriage is to be cherished and respected (Hebrews 13:4). It is not to be taken lightly; rather it ought to be a life-long commitment (cf. Matthew 5:32), for the relationship between man and woman it entails commences in God's presence and is ordained by God. It is a commitment, a covenant between a man and a woman that should only be broken by death, and if any challenge is brought into the marriage relationship by infidelity, it ought to be addressed under the umbrella of Christ's work of reconciliation that can put an end to a relation of enmity, and "substitute for it one of peace and goodwill" (Barrett 1973, 173).

Holiness – Its Nature and Purpose

The essence of holiness is to mirror God or to reflect God's purpose in our everyday lives. When God created Adam and Eve, he created them with a special purpose – to "mirror" Him, to be His representatives within the creation. This is holiness; it is God's purpose for humanity. Based on the connotations of the Hebrew *qodesh*, Greathouse (1998, 18) explains that holiness has a threefold meaning: separation, glory, and purity. Thus, holiness includes purity of heart or dispositions, sanctified affections, and moral goodness. It is sacredness – a state of consecration to God, a state of worship. It is separation to and for the purpose of service to God. Donelson writes that "holiness is not a power or a status that belongs to a temple precinct or one's behavior in the temple. Perfect liturgy does not make us holy. Holiness belongs to every moment of one's life" (Donelson 2001, 83). Thus, holiness ought to include marriage, as the day-by-day activity of the couple. Donelson continues: "holiness comes from obedience to the living and enduring word of God. We make us holy through our deeds. Holiness is not a status; it is a way a living" (Donelson 2001, 83).

Thus, holiness is the result of a right relationship with God. If one has not placed her faith in God to be saved from sin, then her pursuit of holiness is in vain. It starts with being born-again (cf. John 3) and it includes being set apart from the world (cf. 1 Peter 2:9). Quoting Leviticus 11:44 and 19:2, Apostle Peter urges his readers: "prepare your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:13-16). Referring to these passages, Adewuya (2003, 94) rightly explains the relational and experiential meaning holiness takes: "In Leviticus 19, holiness is enacted in, by, and through the life of the community. The divine life, understood in relational terms, is paradigmatic for Israel's life. Holiness is manifest in relationship characterized by integrity, honesty, faithfulness and love". Thus, holiness in the context of marriage is an expression of God's holiness.

It follows from the above that only God can "give" us holiness. It is the view of the present author that He often does so through relationships. As a daily commitment, marriage tests many avenues of our life. Holiness in marriage, therefore, is expressed as faithfulness, trust, integrity, honor, respect, good character, excellence, sacrifice, joy, fruits of the Spirit, etc. Thus, marriage becomes the best place in which one can grow toward wholeness and holiness. Being holy, in this perspective, is first "to be" and only then "to do", which fits the biblical vision of an ethical life.

Beside wholeness, I would associate here with holiness the concept of togetherness. Togetherness in marriage ought to be seen as its highest relational objective. In Christian marriages this may entail praying together, worshiping together, fasting together, attending church together, instructing one another, encouraging one another, strengthening one another. Side by side, husband and wife partake of the Lord's Supper, side by side they go through life's challenges and share their consolations. This is the kind of marital relationship characterized by God's shalom, which prompts God's manifested presence (cf. Matthew 18:20).

Thus, marriage can be the source of happiness if the married couple live a life close to God. Yet, we also ought to recognize that because of sin, marriage relationships can go in the wrong direction, making it inconsistent with the image of holiness thus far presented. This is where spiritual disciplines should lead to forgiveness, which subsequently provides the means to keep on going even in the context of a sinful world. As John Owen, one of the greatest puritan scholars noted, "the person who understands the evil in his heart is the only person who is useful, fruitful, and solid in his belief and obedience" (Owen 1983, 29). Thus, before kindness and compassion for the other, one must recognize his/her own frailty and fallacious living. Only then one can show understanding and compassion for the other. As William Law (1978, 294) suggests,

No one is of the Spirit of Christ but that who has the upmost compassion for sinners. Nor is there any greater sign of your own perfection than when you find within yourself all the love and compassion toward them that are very weak and defective. And on the other hand, you have never less reason to be pleased with yourself than when you find yourself most angry and offended at the behavior of others. All sin is certainly to be hated and abhorred where it is, but then we must set ourselves against the sin as we do against sickness and diseases, by showing ourselves tender and compassionate to the sick and diseased.

Marriage therefore is not first and foremost about making us happy. It is about making us holy. Through the covenant of marriage two Christians pledge to live together (mutuality) so as to make each other holy before God, as a testimony to Christ. This is the purpose of togetherness in marriage. As Adewuya (2003, 170) explains, marital relationships and community relations have mutuality in common:

The idea of mutuality means that "every such relationship represents unity and plurality or plurality in unity. It entails that believers develop within the group meaningful relationship with one another. The relationship believers share means that they sense sympathy, compassion, and empathy for each other, that they "rejoice with those who rejoice" and "mourn with those who mourn" (Romans 12:15). Mutually means likewise that believers seek to live in harmony with each other (Romans 12:16), intercede for each other, care for each other, minister to the needs of one another (Romans 12:13).

Holiness in marriage

It is often said that holiness requires separation. Regarding this, Adewuya (2003, 176) writes:

Paul uses the marriage relationship, the complete separation of man and woman from all others only to each other, as a picture of the relationship that is supposed to exist between God and His people. In this one picture, we see clearly the separation aspect of holiness. As the bride is separated from all others to her husband alone, so the people of God are separated not only from any form of defilement but to Him.

Evidently, the Pauline example takes marriage beyond the notion of mutual comfort. Within the perspective of holiness, marriage also speaks about the divine relationship established between God and His people. Paul's analogy makes this explicit: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, cleanse her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless" (Ephesians 5:25-27). Regarding marital holiness, the implications are that when we fail to behold the image of God in our spouse and instead embark on a deceitful life, when we become disengaged as married people, we are headed ultimately to separation from God. Drawing close to God, on the other hand, is the solution. Holiness in marriage means separation from the world and sin and closeness to God.

Furthermore, I argue that holiness requires wholeness and integration. These are basic facts that underline all other psychological characteristics necessary to marital adjustment. Without wholeness or integration there is little chance of marital success and therefore of holiness. Wholeness and integration define the unity or oneness that must underline the marital relationship. On the other hand, when characterized by anxious instability, dishonesty, jealousy, immaturity, harassment, inadequacy, inferiority, guilt and other similar feelings and attitudes, oneness and togetherness are destroyed; and together with these, the integrity of the couple is impaired, the marital union is weakened and eventually the marriage fails. Such dysfunctionality, I argue, is fought with integrity, both spiritual and relational. The breakdown of spiritual fidelity is often described in the Bible through marital analogies. Jeremiah, for instance, compares idolatry with adultery (Jeremiah 3:8). Also, Jesus picks up on this image when he refers to an "adulterous" generation (Mark 8:38), and when he portrays himself as the "bridegroom" (Matthew 9:15) and the kingdom of heaven as a "wedding banquet" (Matthew 22:1-14). The same imagery, depicting the end of earthly history, is present in the book of Revelation: "Let us rejoice and be glad and give glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready." (Revelation 19:7). All these show that the marital relationship as wholeness and holiness is never far from God's mind and purposes.

Considering the above, one ought to wonder what practical action is available to the believing couple to ensure the possibility of a sanctified marriage. I suggest in the conclusion that prayer is the essential practice that leads to holiness in a person's and a couple's life. Paul urges believers to pray continually (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Peter connects the success of one's prayer to the quality of one's marital relationship: "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers" (1 Peter 3:7). Thus, prayer appears here to be the essence of one's spirituality. This is even more so as Paul singles out prayer as the foundation of abstinence in a couple's search for holiness, understood as drawing nearer to God (Levine 2004, 141; Deming 2004, 213).

Conclusion

Holiness in marriage means love and respect for each other, it means togetherness in all aspects of life, material and spiritual. It means wholeness and integration, sacredness and happiness. It calls us to act in God-like manner towards the other. It is a relationship that becomes a reflection of God's image, for holiness is to be defined by God's nature, not by the custom of humans. It is attainable by such means as prayer and other spiritual disciplines in which husband and wife engage harmoniously, in mutuality. Holiness should be present in every aspect of a Christian's conduct, it is the

way in which one becomes more like Christ. It entails loving God with heart, soul, mind, and strength; and loving your spouse as yourself. Something that is holy is separated from common use for a special purpose. As such, marital holiness is rooted in the relationship with God in Christ. God is the ultimate source of holiness. Thus, holiness has singularity of purpose, for it is the preparation to meet the Lord. To conclude, the pursuit of holiness in marital relationships should be regarded as a Christian value, for a holy marriage is a covenant with one another and God. Ultimately is the way in which human beings become a reflection of the Creator.

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