

THE GOD-GIVEN MARITAL MANDATE

A careful reading of Scripture outlines a blueprint for marriage that is becoming an increasingly uncommon influence for the 21st-century family.

What are the two institutions established by God in Eden? If a typical Seventh-day Adventist were asked this question, the immediate response would invariably be: marriage and the Sabbath.

For many decades, that response would have been considered sufficient. The term *Sabbath* has been universally understood by Adventists to refer specifically to the seventh-day Sabbath, as set aside by God at the end of the six days of creation.

For the word *marriage*, Adventists have automatically assumed that a proper biblical marriage must be a monogamous, heterosexual, intra-faith union. This historic view, however, has recently been challenged.

In discussing the thorny problem of plural marriage among converts from cultures in which polygamy is acceptable, a 1992 article in *Ministry* magazine stated that to refuse baptism to a practicing polygamist was a “serious example of cross-cultural confusion” that hinders church growth.¹

Though the church has disapproved for decades of marriages between Adventists and non-Adventists, at the 1993 Annual Council in

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Bangalore, India, a division president pointed out that in his part of the world, women members far outnumber the men. He stated that women in the church who wanted to marry would have to marry non-Adventists simply because there weren’t enough men in the church to go around. And the *Minister’s Handbook* now merely urges Adventist ministers not to perform weddings between members and nonmembers. Adventists are becoming increasingly open to interfaith marriages. To refuse to marry a non-Adventist to an Adventist, as one pastor recently put it, “is religious bigotry.”²

A few years ago, a former Bible instructor who subsequently graduated in theology wrote of what she calls her “Martin Luther experience.”³ She describes her “unusual calling” from God that, she feels, came to her in a dream about being in love with another woman. She became involved with this woman, who was studying to become an Adventist, describing this love as something that “felt right in a way that transcends moral argument.”⁴ And in the mid-1980s, a leading Seventh-day Adventist ethicist suggested that Adventist Christians should encourage homosexuals who do not believe they can change to live together in faithful homo-



sexual unions.⁵

When ideas of polygamous, inter-faith, and homosexual unions are being accepted by some within Adventism, the need to restudy the Holy Scriptures on the issue of marriage is acutely manifest. The specific marital structure established by God in the beginning has implications for all Bible-believing Christians.

The Pattern Established in Eden

The Book of Genesis provides a concrete account of the institution of marriage. The first two chapters of the Bible deal directly with the question of human sexuality. These opening chapters of Scripture are determinative for a biblical theology of sexuality, since here the pattern is established and pronounced “very good” (Gen. 1:31, NASB)⁶ by God Himself.

“Foundational to a Christian understanding of sexuality is God’s plan in creation found in Genesis 1 and 2.”⁷ Though some information is to be found in Genesis 1, most of the data relating to marital form appears in chapter 2. The passages that specifically relate to the institution of the first marriage are located in Genesis 1:27, 28; 2:18, 21-24:

“God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them; and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it;

and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth. . . .’

“Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him. . . .’

“So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh at that place. And the Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. And the man said, ‘This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.’ For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.”

Various biblical scholars have analyzed these passages and have come to several conclusions regarding the essence and meaning of marriage. Before addressing the actual form of the original marriage, the question as to whether marriage is simply a social custom or a fundamental divine institution must be considered.

The Originator of Marriage

Some have posited that marriage is merely a societal or secular institution, or one of the options in Western culture. J. S. Wright and J. A. Thomp-

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son give the following definition: “Marriage is the state in which men and women can live together in sexual relationship with the approval of their social group.”⁸ If this is so, then whatever form of marriage a society approves, whether monogamous or polygamous, heterosexual or homosexual, intrafaith or interfaith, must be considered acceptable.

Beyond being simply a sexual relationship approved by society, however, marriage in the first chapters of Genesis involves a divine dimension. Genesis 1:27 says that God created them, “male and female,” and charged them to be “fruitful and multiply” (verse 28). This conjugal relationship is explicated further in the following chapter. Genesis 2:18 records the words of God: “I will make him a helper.” In other words, it was God who decided to create “a suitable companion” (vs. 18, TEV) for the man. Then, it was God who “brought her to the man” (vs. 22) to be his wife. Thus, both passages specifically state

that God is the originator of the marriage relationship.

Clearly, God was the creator of this union. He was the one who instituted marriage in the beginning. Samuel Dresner notes that “the Midrash suggests that God Himself performed the first wedding ceremony for Adam and Eve.”⁹ As Ellen White observed, “God celebrated the first marriage. Thus the institution has for its originator the Creator of the universe.”¹⁰

The Number of Partners

From Genesis 2:21-24 it becomes clear that this marriage took place between one man and one woman. The repeated use of singular nouns and pronouns in this passage is noteworthy: God decides to make “a helper” for “the man” (vs. 18); He selects “one” rib from “the man” (vs. 21), and fashions it into “a woman” whom He then takes to “the man” (vs. 22); “the man” says that “she shall be called Woman” (vs. 23); thus, “a man” leaves his parents and is joined to “his wife” (vs. 24). In this distinct

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way the original marital form can be seen to be monogamous.

Wright and Thompson correctly note that “monogamy is implicit in the story of Adam and Eve, since God created only one wife for Adam.”¹¹ Even Eugene Hillman, who attempts to prove that polygamy was legitimate according to Mosaic Law, admits that “if we accept it as divinely revealed truth that our species started from only one pair of human beings, then certainly the original marriage must have been monogamous.”¹²

“This first marriage is an example of what all marriages should be. God gave the man one wife. Had he deemed it best for man to have more than one wife, he could as easily have given him two; but he sanctioned no such thing.”¹³ Since the first marriage is seen to be unambiguously monogamous, this marital form is thus understood as representative of the “will of God.”

The Gender Issue

From both Genesis 1 and 2 it becomes plain that this marriage took place between two people of the opposite sex. The repeated use of

contrasting gender terms illustrates this: God creates a “male” and a “female” and charges them to be fruitful (1:27, 28); He fashions the rib He took from the “man” into a “woman,” and then takes “her” to the “man” (2:22); the man calls her “woman” because she was taken out of “man” (vs. 23); thus a “man” leaves his parents and is joined to his “wife” (vs. 24). In this well-defined manner it can be easily noted that the original marital form was heterosexual.

The obvious complementary anatomical differences serve to further illustrate this point. Further, the fact that the commission to “multiply” (Gen.1:28) can be fulfilled only by means of people of the opposite gender additionally supports this view that God’s original pattern for matrimony was decisively heterosexual.

In commenting on the first biblical passage concerning the creation of the human species (Gen. 1:27), Dresner recognizes the fact that “heterosexuality is at once proclaimed to be the order of creation.”¹⁴ Greg Bahnsen is much more direct, noting that the creation account reveals that sex is to take

place only within the context of a marriage that is “exclusively heterosexual in nature.”¹⁵

The Faith Factor

Though the concepts of monogamy and heterosexuality can be seen quite plainly from the text of Genesis, the issue of the similarity of the religious faith of the marriage partners requires a deeper search.

Genesis 2:18 records God’s words: “I will make him a helper suitable for him.” Other biblical versions: “I shall make a partner suited to him” (REB); “a suitable companion” (TEV). These Bible versions better capture the true essence of the Hebrew term *kenegdô*, which means a “counterpart,” one “corresponding to him.” Obviously, for Eve to be a truly suitable partner to Adam, she had to have the same basic faith perspective as her spouse. Studies by Umberto Cassuto and others appear to bear out this contention that the Bible indicates a compatibility of ethical and religious beliefs as part of the original marital pattern.¹⁶ *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* suggests that the context of Genesis 2:18 shows that the woman is to be a partner with the man in the areas of both family and worship.¹⁷

A second passage in the Creation story that suggests this indispensable religious concord is located in Genesis 2:24. The man and woman are to cleave to each other and become

“one flesh.” This is a covenant partnership, a mutual dependence and a genuine reciprocity in all areas of life, which is impossible for two who hold differing religious convictions.

Ellen White consistently spoke out against marriage between an unbeliever and a believer, which she defined as one who has “accepted the truth for this time.”¹⁸ She described these interfaith marriages as forbidden by God and prohibited in the Bible. Thus, she admonished that it is better to remain unmarried than to violate God’s clearly revealed will.¹⁹

What significance does this first marital pattern have for believers? Is it merely a desirable, yet optional model? Is it simply an ideal? Or is this first marriage to be viewed as an unchanging standard, a biblical mandate?

Significance of the First Marriage

The passage in Genesis 2:24, which forms the closing statement about the first marriage, begins with a Hebrew term that the New American Standard Bible interprets as “for this cause.” Several other English Bibles render it “therefore.” The writer of the Pentateuch frequently utilized this concept when making explanatory statements about an occurrence. This happened when people or place names were being identified.

More important, this usage also occurs in passages in which the

writer explains the reason behind the observance of certain regulations and laws. In the fourth commandment, for example, “On the seventh day of creation he rested; for this reason . . . he ordered that the sabbath should be observed.”²⁰ Genesis 2:24 is similarly structured. “The initial [‘therefore’], in fact, certifies beyond any doubt that [the inspired Bible writer] intends here to *explain* something.”²¹ Thus, Angelo Tosato concludes that this passage “speaks of marriage in a normative way.”²²

Other scholars have likewise noticed the significance of “therefore,” or “for this reason,” in Genesis 2:24. Nahum Sarna states that this term introduces an observation on the part of the writer in which some “fundamental aspects of the marital relationship are traced to God’s original creative act and seen as part of the ordained natural order.”²³ Similarly, Herbert Ryle recognizes that this “sentence beginning with ‘therefore’ supplies the application, or relation, of the ancient narrative to later times.”²⁴ Thus, it appears that just as God had instituted the monogamous, heterosexual, intrafaith marriage of the first parents of the human race, He intends that this pattern be normative for marital relationships for the rest of humanity for all time.

The significance of this first marriage is further underscored by the grammar of Genesis 2:24. The first verb, “he will leave,” is rendered, as

the Revised Standard Version (RSV) has it, as something occurring customarily: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.” However, the Hebrew can also be interpreted to express actions to be repeated in the future, as the several versions put it: American Standard Version (ASV) puts it: “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (see also ASV, KJV, NIV, NKJV, NASB).

This form may also be used to express a command, informing people of what ought or ought not to be done. Genesis 2:24 could thus be legitimately translated: “Therefore a man should leave his father and mother, and cling to his wife, and they should become one flesh.” The verse can be interpreted as God’s direct intention. Since this text begins with the introductory term *therefore*, the Hebrew imperfect would be more faithfully translated as expressing a command, thus indicating that here a standard is being set, a norm established, a mandate given by God Himself.

Even though these words in Genesis 2:24 were evidently penned by a human being, since they are the utterance of divine revelation, “Christ could quote them, therefore, as the word of God (Matt. xix. 5).”²⁵ Therefore, since it is a clear expression of God’s will, this state-

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ment is of great import for all.

Gordon Wenham correctly understands this verse as “applying the principles of the first marriage to every subsequent marriage.”²⁶ According to Sereno Dwight: “This is the Great Original Law of Marriage binding on the whole human family.”²⁷

Speaking about this first marriage, Ellen White said: “God gave to Adam one wife—showing to all who should live upon the earth, his order and law in that respect.”²⁸ Thus, this first monogamous, heterosexual, intrafaith marriage becomes the only acceptable biblical pattern and model for all marital unions.

The Model Evident at the Flood

It is also instructive to consider the marital structure evident during the second “beginning” of this world: the story of Noah and the flood. Even though a considerable amount of Genesis is devoted to the story of the worldwide deluge, it is apparent that not much is directly

recorded about the marital status of those involved in the narrative. The few facts that are mentioned, however, suggest careful examination.

Genesis 6:1-4, 11-13 describes the corruption of the antediluvians: “It came about, when men began to multiply on the face of the land, and daughters were born to them, that the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves, whomever they chose. Then the Lord said, ‘My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.’ The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore children to them. Those were the mighty men who were of old, men of renown. . . . Now the earth was corrupt in the sight of God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God looked on the earth, and behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth.

“The Sodomitish practices which brought the judgment of God upon the world, and caused it to be deluged with water, and which caused Sodom to be destroyed by fire, are fast increasing.” In brief, the violation of the marital norm of heterosexuality was one of the reasons for the Genesis flood.

Then God said to Noah, ‘the end of all flesh has come before Me; for the earth is filled with violence because of them; and behold, I am about to destroy them with the earth.’”

The Genesis record is clear not only that “Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord” (vs. 8), but that “Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God” (vs. 10). When God decided to destroy the Earth with a flood because of its corruption, God called upon Noah to build an ark to preserve animals and human beings. The record simply states that, when the ark and all the necessary preparations had been made, “Noah and Shem and Ham and Japheth, the sons of Noah, and Noah’s wife and the three wives of his sons with them, entered the ark” (7:13). That there were precisely eight persons saved in the ark is clear from both Old and New Testaments (Gen. 7:13; 1 Peter 3:20; 2 Peter 2:5).

Some have said that one of the contributing factors to the depravity of humanity was the practice of

polygamy. Others have disagreed.

The phrase in contention appears in Genesis 6:2, which reads literally, “They took wives for themselves, whomever they chose.” Most versions render this clause similarly. Robert Jamieson remarks, “the phrase ‘took them wives of *all* which they chose’ evidently implies something very different from the simple exercise of a free choice”²⁹ and concludes that this phrase indicates the practice of polygamy. This understanding is clear in the Jerusalem Bible: “They married as many as they chose,” and this translation appears to be a legitimate rendering of the passage under consideration.

Other biblical scholars also understand this phrase as a reference to polygamy. And Dwight goes a step further: “The fact that Polygamy became general, or that men took them wives of all whom they chose, is here obviously assigned as the cause of that universal corruption and violence, which occasioned the Deluge.”³⁰

Ellen White understood this passage similarly: “When men began to

multiply upon the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, they took them wives of all which they chose. This was one of the great sins of the inhabitants of the old world, which brought the wrath of God upon them. This custom was practiced after the Flood, and became so common that even righteous men fell into the practice and had a plurality of wives.”³¹

The scriptural account reveals that the marriages of Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth were all monogamous unions at the time of the Flood (Gen. 7:13).

On the contrary, polygamists were judged and destroyed by the Flood. Ellen White highlights this by discussing Noah’s monogamous marriage and his preservation in the ark in contrast to polygamy. In fact, she notes that these antediluvians “would not leave off their sins, but continued in polygamy,”³² and were thus exterminated. Thus, God’s direct judgment of polygamy—by means of the Flood, and not saving polygamous couples in the ark—makes plain His will concerning the number of partners in a marriage.

Genesis 6:12 is an additional key verse concerning marital structures at the time of the universal deluge, noting that “all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth.” Dresner notes that the ancient rabbis interpreted the “flesh” corrupting its “way” as a reference to homosexual-

ity, among other sexual evils.³³ Thus, the rabbinic understanding of the Flood story affirms that the wickedness of the antediluvians was essentially sexual.

Interestingly, Ellen White confirms this notion: “The Sodomitish practices which brought the judgment of God upon the world, and caused it to be deluged with water, and which caused Sodom to be destroyed by fire, are fast increasing.”³⁴ In brief, the violation of the marital norm of heterosexuality was one of the reasons for the Genesis flood.

How did the pre-Flood population relate to the issue of interfaith marriages? “The sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves, whomever they chose” (Gen. 6:2).

This passage has generated considerable recent debate. The primary question revolves around who these “sons of God” were that married the “daughters of men.”

Joseph Hong claims that “when the term [sons of God] is used elsewhere in the Old Testament, it clearly has the meaning of ‘heavenly beings’ or ‘angels.’”³⁵ After citing passages in Job and Psalms, he says that most interpreters identify these as celestial beings but frankly admits that this understanding is not free of difficulty.

Ronald Youngblood points out some of the difficulties attending this view. For example, in Luke 20:34-36

Jesus says that angels do not marry, which would contradict Genesis 6:2, 4 if that passage were talking about angels. This is especially true since the text utilizes the usual expression for marriage. John Willis adds: “If indeed angels were intended by the author, then one is hard put to explain why God did not become grieved with them and destroy them rather than mankind.”³⁶

Considerable evidence indicates, however, that it is preferable to interpret the “sons of God” as referring to human beings rather than angels.

John T. Willis theorizes that sons of God could be merely men who called on the name of the Lord or who walked with God. He points out that both the Old and New Testaments frequently refer to God’s people as “sons of God.” He further suggests that the daughters of men might be women who are worldly- or materialistically-minded, such as those who are frequently condemned in Scripture.³⁷

Similarly, H. C. Leupold, after citing several texts, states that Hosea 1:10 “is, if anything, a still stronger passage, saying specifically to Israel, ‘Ye are sons of the living God.’”³⁸ He asserts that the Sethites described in Genesis 5 as having among them men who walked with God were men who worshipped God.

In the very next verse, “‘My Spirit shall not strive with man forever’” (Gen. 6:3), God expresses His divine

response of judgment on the people because of their mixed marriages noted in verse 2. This confirms the notion that these sons of God are indeed human beings. This interpretation makes the most sense, since it was humankind that suffered the destruction of the devastating deluge, and not angels.

Based on the textual evidence, there is no reason not to interpret “sons of God” in Genesis 6 as men. Indeed, this understanding is preferred in the setting of the passage.

Taking this study of the illegitimate marriage between the righteous and the wicked one step further, Victor Hamilton remarks: “The sin, then, is a forbidden union, a yoking of what God intended to keep apart, the intermarriage of believer with unbeliever . . . The order of the two remaining verses [3 and 4] . . . is interesting. That is, the word about the divine displeasure comes between the cohabitation scene (v. 2) and the reference to the children produced by the unions (v. 4). By placing the verse where it is, the author is making the point that this forbidden union itself is offensive to Yahweh, rather than the fact that such a union produced (hybrid) offspring.”³⁹

Analogously, Ronald Youngblood has explained that the action of these men of God to intermarry with Cain’s wicked lineage resulted in the judgment from the Lord by means of the deluge.⁴⁰ Ellen White

hints at the same situation when she notes that the righteous descendants of Seth displeased God by intermarrying with the idolatrous Cainites.⁴¹

In contradistinction to those who were destroyed by the Flood, it seems clear that each of the four couples saved in the ark had a monogamous, heterosexual, intrafaith marriage. “Noah had but one wife, and their united family discipline was blessed of God. Because Noah’s sons were righteous, they were preserved in the ark with their righteous father.”⁴² Apparently, by preserving in the ark only those who were not involved in polygamous, homosexual, or interfaith conjugal relationships, God was conveying His divine approval on the marital pattern that He had originally established in Eden.

When the Flood waters subsided, “Noah went out, and his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives with him” (Gen. 8:18). Here was the beginning of the new world, with Noah as the second founder of the human race. “Yahweh, so to speak, set about doing his work all over again. Noah became the new ‘first man’ and, like Adam, ‘walked with God’ (vi.9). This creation was an explicit covenant (ix.9) and God gave a renewed blessing to the marriage of the new ‘first man and woman’ (ix.7).”⁴³

The identical charge that God gave to the world’s first couple, “‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth’” (Gen. 1:28), He now repeated

to Noah and his sons (9:1), all of whose marriages complied with God’s original standard. In accepting these monogamous, heterosexual, intrafaith couples to be the progenitors of the new race on Earth, God was in a sense repeating history.

It would be well for all Christians, including Seventh-day Adventists, to promote and reemphasize God’s original standard and pattern for marriage—that everyone needs to abstain from all polygamous, homosexual, interfaith sexual alliances, and to uphold the God-given marital mandate as established in Eden: monogamous, heterosexual, intrafaith conjugal relationships.

“Heaven looks with pleasure upon a marriage formed with an earnest desire to conform to the directions given in the Scripture.”⁴⁴ □

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