

One Man and One Woman?

This is a phrase that we hear too often today about marriage. There are many people who seem to assume that this is quite Biblical because it is often referred to as God's plan for marriage, "one man and one woman." It makes me wonder if those who make these statements have actually read their Bibles because, throughout most of the scriptural accounts, Polygamy was acceptable, since many important leaders clearly had more than one wife and even concubines. There is only several verses of scripture in the New Testament that particularly refer to church leaders having just one wife; a bishop - 1 Timothy 3:2; a deacon - 1 Timothy 3:12; and a spiritual leader - Titus 1:6. Since these offices of leadership were singled out regarding this recommendation it appears to me that others in the churches may have had more wives than one. Just look up the word "wives" in a search engine for the entire Bible and you will see a multiplicity of Godly people who had many wives throughout the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.

"When we look at the marriage customs of our ancestors, we discover several striking facts. For example, for the most of Western history, marriage was not a mere personal matter concerning only husband and wife, but rather the business of their two families which brought them together. Most marriages, therefore, were arranged. Moreover, the wife usually had much fewer rights than her husband and was expected to be subservient to him. To a considerable extent, marriage was also an economic arrangement. There was little room for romantic love, and even simple affection was not considered essential. Procreation and cooperation were the main marital duties."

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"Traditionally, scholars have distinguished between four basic types of marriage:

- 1. Monogamy (i.e., one husband having one wife),*
- 2. (polygamy:) polygyny (i.e., one husband having several wives),*
- 3. (polygamy:) polyandry (i.e., several husbands having one wife),*
- 4. group marriage (i.e., several husbands having several wives).*

Monogamy is the prevalent form of marriage today. Polygyny and polyandry (collectively called polygamy) were once practiced in various parts of the world, but now seem to be on the decline. Group marriage has always been rare.

In Victorian times it was often believed that the four basic types of marriage were representative of different stages of human evolution. Thus, the earliest human beings had supposedly lived in a state of indiscriminate promiscuity until they established some form of group marriage. On the contrary, we have learned in the meantime that all four types of marriage have existed since earliest times and under all sorts of technological and economic conditions. Some very "primitive" peoples have always practiced monogamy, while some "civilized" peoples have been and still are polygamous. Moreover, we now understand that each of the four basic types of marriage can appear in several variations. Still, today there is little doubt that monogamy in one variation or another has always been the most common type of marriage. In view of this fact, one might perhaps call monogamy the "natural" form of marriage, although one should not conclude that everyone will always be happy with it, or that it is practical in every situation. One can, of course, proclaim an ideal, but in real life one has to allow for some improvisation and experimentation."

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What were weddings like in Jesus' day?

Since the author of this Gospel does not fully answer this question and since the readers of his day would fully have such knowledge, I received some interesting information from a Rabbi friend, Gordon Gladstone. Here are some things that he shared.

- At that time, Jewish marriage was purely an act of kinyan / acquisition; the man, essentially, purchased a wife from the man who controlled her, be that a father, a brother, or whatever male relative. A marriage was arranged by shtar, kesef, or beeah (document, silver, or intercourse).
 - If shtar, the "groom's" agent delivers a document stating terms to the controlling male.
 - If kesef, an agreed amount of silver was delivered to the controlling male. [This morphed into a wedding ring in later centuries.]
 - If beeah, the man would fall upon the woman, penetrating her, whilst howling, "H'ray aht m'kudeshet li." (Behold thou art consecrated unto me)
- The "wedding ceremony" did not require clergy; only 2 adult male witnesses. The "liturgy" was the man saying, "H'ray aht m'kudeshet li."

When I asked him about the length of time for the duration of a marriage or festival celebrations, he shared this: Any happy occasion was a time for celebration, but we can only infer things such as duration, unless specifically mentioned in Scripture. For example, look at the first chapter of the OT book of Esther.

Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus--this is Ahasuerus who reigned, from India even unto Ethiopia, over a hundred and seven and twenty provinces-- 2 that in those days, when the king Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan the castle, 3 in the third year of his reign, he made a feast unto all his princes and his servants; the army of Persia and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces, being before him; 4 when he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honour of his excellent majesty, many days, even a hundred and fourscore days. 5 And when these days were fulfilled, the king made a feast unto all the people that were present in Shushan the castle, both great and small, seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace; 6 there were hangings of white, fine cotton, and blue, bordered with cords of fine linen and purple, upon silver rods and pillars of marble; the couches were of gold and silver, upon a pavement of green, and white, and shell, and onyx marble. 7 And they gave them drink in vessels of gold--the vessels being diverse one from another--and royal wine in abundance, according to the bounty of the king. 8 And the drinking was according to the law; none did compel; for so the king had appointed to all the officers of his house, that they should do according to every man's pleasure.

From this we gather that a mishteh, a banquet of wine, could go on for a long time in the time of the Persian Empire that followed the Babylonian era.

Those who insist that we must define marriage as a union of one man and one woman may not be aware of the fact that there are many marriages today, in this and other countries, that include more than one wife. One might also need to consider the facts of divorce and how "serial monogamy" may fit into this picture. The Bible has some things to say about divorce but, to my knowledge, there is no single interpretation of these various scriptures that seems to suit everyone. As always, when it comes to scriptures in every religion, it is a matter of interpretation and correlation of the times and customs of the era in which it was written.

Consider that the Bible does not sanction nor does it condemn any arrangement of family. There is a great variety of family relationships throughout our Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Here are just a few to give presence to what I am suggesting:

- Abraham - known as the patriarch of the Jewish people -
 - Sarah - his wife and sister - bore him a son named Isaac
 - Hagar - Sarah's maid servant - bore him a son named Ishmael
 - NOTE: Abraham is quoted as saying that actually Sarai is his half-sister since they have the same father but not the same mother. When Abraham moved to Negev he offered (his sister) Sarah to marry the king while not mentioning they were also married.

- After the death of Sarah, Abraham marries a woman named Keturah, who bears him six more sons
- Jacob - (whose name was later changed to Israel after he fought with an angel)
 - He had a total of 4 wives with a total of 12 sons and 1 daughter - He married Leah and Rachel and also two of their maidservants as wives, Bilhah and Zilpah
- Solomon - According to the Bible, Solomon had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines.
- Jesus - according to basic tradition he did not have any wives.
 - According to Mormon theology, Jesus was married and had wives. Thus, in Heaven, Jesus will continue to be married to his wives forever.
- Jesus' Disciples - The Bible does not mention any wives for the disciples except perhaps Peter because there is a reference to his mother-in-law in the Gospels
- Paul the Apostle - The Bible never says whether Paul was married or not.
 - Some believe that the Apostle Paul was married because history tells us that a member of the Sanhedrin was required to be married but scripture does not specifically say he claimed such membership.

This is a small segment to demonstrate that there is no particular or one view of marriage or family in the Bible. For most of the Bible polygamy seems to be the primary family arrangement and there is no indication that it was ever condemned. The definition of family throughout biblical times seems to have been basically defined by local and social customs and not by any divine law or practice.

Diversity is the Key:

Like the universe and the earth on which we live, change is a constant and the variety of those changes are at times quite unique and different. While some change is very slow there are many changes that we can observe during our lifetime. People who live in temperate zones on earth are use to seeing the seasons change at least four times each year. Once in a while, as happened in 2011, we witnessed a major earthquake in Japan that actually moved the whole land mass of Japan by eight feet. We continually experience birth and death in our personal lives as well as in those in our families, friends, and neighbors. Most of us have noticed that whole communities of towns, cities, and even countries have begun or ended around the world. People who have lived a long life in our times remember when there were no automobiles, airplanes, radio, television, and can only imagine what may be coming along when they are no longer here. Clearly diversity and change are inevitable in every facet of our existence.

Looking around the world diversity is absolutely evident when we study family relationships and marriage. Even in the various States of our United States we observe quite a variety of difference in how couples meet, get to know each other in dating, customs surrounding a formal engagement or announcement, in marriage ceremonies of both religious and secular nature, to the many ways in which couples live their lives together. The Bible has little or nothing to say about all this diversity of custom in suggesting or insisting on any particular manner or form.

From Arrangement to Attraction:

Until recent times, most marriages were arranged by families or communities for the benefit of their society and manner of life. Most of these societies were patriarchal giving the men who were in charge the primary ability to make these arrangements. Diversity was also a part of these arrangements because the variety and customs differed widely, not only because of differing local customs but also over the history of time. The primary emphasis was the importance and value of community which was considered paramount for a long period of human history. These customs were supported by the fact that the economy of most of these societal

arrangement was inherited property that was handed down from one generation to another by fathers, chiefs, or royalty. It was important to control the proper transmittal of the property and valued assets from one generation to another.

More recently, especially in first world countries, there has been a movement toward the importance of the individual. In recent history more and more women have come "into their own" as it were, especially when they were given the right to vote in our democracies and to become political leaders in local and national governments. While men still may have an economic advantage, especially in salaries for instance, this continues to change since women are no longer economically dependent on men. Even our children, our sons and daughters, have been emancipated from forced labor with the freedom to choose their work and place in our societies. In countries like ours, arranged marriages are few and far between and couples have the freedom to choose their partners. The reasons for such attraction and arrangement may be quite diverse and even change over a lifetime.

Not too long ago the traditional words of a marriage, civil or religious, went something like this; *I N., take you N., to be my wife/husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow.* This vow was taken from the Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church which has been used by many in both religious and civil ceremonies. With the growing rise in divorce, the length of more than half of marriages today hardly last until the death of one of the partners. Most of the words in the traditional vows are no longer true since love and money have become two of the main causes for divorce. It should also be noted that marriages that are performed in a formal religious setting do not seem to lend any divine protection to couples breaking apart as noted in the following:

Divorce rates among conservative Christians were significantly higher than for other faith groups, and much higher than Atheists and Agnostics experience.

George Barna, president and founder of Barna Research Group, commented:

"While it may be alarming to discover that born again Christians are more likely than others to experience a divorce, that pattern has been in place for quite some time. Even more disturbing, perhaps, is that when those individuals experience a divorce many of them feel their community of faith provides rejection rather than support and healing. But the research also raises questions regarding the effectiveness of how churches minister to families. The ultimate responsibility for a marriage belongs to the husband and wife, but the high incidence of divorce within the Christian community challenges the idea that churches provide truly practical and life-changing support for marriages." http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_dira.htm

With divorce on the rise, especially in first world countries, perhaps Serial Monogamy is the growing trend between couples. It appears that, for whatever reasons, not all humans can or will continue a lifelong relationship with the same partners.

What is Normal?:

That may be the 64 thousand dollar question. I am not sure that we can ever clearly define what is normal, especially when it refers to marriage. As communications have increased and our world has grown smaller we are well aware of the plethora of the variety that exists around the globe now. The better part of human history simply shows that there was hardly a time when any one form of marriage was normal. As economic resources expanded, especially in first world countries, and we began to move from the major emphasis on community toward the individual, we have seen the growing choice of couples in forming a marriage. Perhaps the lack of community involvement in marriage may be one of the causes for an increase in divorce as couples change their

personal mating choice. The most we can say is that the definition and customs in marriage continue to change as time moves forward.

Presently human relationships have continued to develop in seemingly new directions. Mixed marriages, as they are called, are much more common and much less controversial than they were only a few years ago. What once was illegal in many States in America is now legal in all States. It wasn't long ago that most people gave no thought to the existence of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender people. Now that LGBT people are more independently secure as persons we notice that they are much more open about their personal sexuality. When children were born without clearly identifiable genitalia parents would make the choice as to their being male or female. Now we have learned that even some children who were born with normal genitalia become uncomfortable with their physically identifiable signs of sexuality. More and more these transexual people, with today's ability to chance such improper sexual identity, are choosing to physically make corrections to match their true identity.

In addition we now notice about 10% of our population who have been born with a natural attraction to their same sex for choosing a life's partner. The majority of people today seem to believe that such attraction is a choice and that it can be altered and, even though our medical and scientific communities no longer support this, we see that most religious communities resist these findings. When we look at our human history of relationships over time we can see that these "tendencies" were always present. The stigma seems to continue only because of religious dogma and their narrow interpretations that fostered such repression. Perhaps we need to acknowledge this ongoing diversity and properly accept it as part of the minority of persons who find this attraction normal. No one actually chooses their sexuality since it originates in our genetic code from conception. None can claim to have chosen their sexual identity as male or female at birth but yet there is still a stigma attached to Transgendered persons who sense a sincere need for change. Now the evidence is clear that none of us chooses to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered, it's all in the genes, but too many people are still questioning this scientific finding.

Too many people are being ruined by stilted prejudice and our social human history brings to life the clear picture of this undeserved, cruel treatment. These people, who are seen to be "different", while a minority in our overall population, continues to be a stigma in many of our families. The narrow view that there ever was or that human sexuality is only for one man and one women is to ignore or deny human history and a denial of our growing understanding of sexuality in all forms of life.

Love is the solution:

We will all be winners when people begin to love and treat others in the same manner that they treat themselves. Too many people know how to make excuses for themselves but they refuse to give the same latitude to others. In his book, [Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the fate of every person who ever lived], Rob Bell asks and answers an important question (pg. 109), *"Which is stronger and more powerful, the hardness of the human heart or God's unrelenting, infinite, expansive love? Thousands through the years have answered that question with the resounding response, 'God's love, of course.'"* He goes on to say on, page 120, *"That's how love works. It can't be forced, manipulated, or coerced. It always leaves room for the other to decide. God says yes, we can have what we want, because love wins."* When we willingly open up our hearts, without being harder on others than we are on ourselves, and love others we all become winners. Love, therefore, is the solution.

None of us can claim perfection and who among us is the clear definition of normal? When we consider our history and even our present day circumstances and customs, what is marriage or family? Why are we so

perplexed by our differences? Bishop Desmond Tutu in his book, "God Is Not A Christian", may have the best reason for this on page 4; *"We appear to be scared of diversity in ethnicities, in religious faiths, in political and ideological points of view. We have an impatience with anything and anyone that suggests there might just be another way of looking at the same thing, another answer worth exploring. There is a nostalgia for the security in the womb of a safe sameness, and so we shut out the stranger and the alien; we look for security in those who can provide answers that must be unassailable because no one is permitted to dissent, to question. There is a longing for the homogeneous and an allergy against the different, the other."* In the editor's preface to this poignant book we are told that *"the values underlying his advocacy-drawn from his faith and the vision of a shared humanity held out by the African spirit of "ubuntu" (a person is a person only through other persons)."* Perhaps, when we acknowledge the God of the Universe, we can have a complete view of our own humanity in order to appropriately respect the way others are.

Love not only destroys the fear we have of others, those whom we perceive as different, but love also brings us confidence for living. (1 John 4:18) *"No fear exists where his love is. Rather, perfect love gets rid of fear, because fear involves punishment. The person who lives in fear doesn't have perfect love."* Love also enables us to have compassion and forgiveness for ourselves and others when we sense such seeming imperfections. We define compassion as "the humane quality of understanding the suffering of others and wanting to do something about it". Compassion is also a part of forgiveness (compassionate feelings that support a willingness to forgive) when we discover areas of life that we should change for mutual benefit. Love is always demonstrated in forgiveness. In one of his recent "Daily Meditations", Fr. Richard Rohr shares this insight, *"If you don't get forgiveness, you're missing the whole mystery of God. You are still living in a world of meritocracy, of quid-pro-quo thinking, a world of performance and behavior at which none of us succeed, if we are honest. Forgiveness is the great thawing of all logic, reason, and worthiness, and the primary way we move from the economy of merit to the economy of grace. Forgiveness is a collapsing into the mystery of God as totally unearned love, unmerited grace. It is the final surrender to the humility and power of a Divine Love and a Divine Lover."* [Adapted from *Hope Against Darkness: The Transforming Vision of Saint Francis in an Age of Anxiety*, pp. 141, 146]

Human sexuality and relationships, like marriage, are diverse and have shown us their variety throughout history and continue in our global differences today. We often say that no two people are alike and this is clearly true in our cultural differences around the world. While some may insist that their ways are best it will not change the reality of life then and now. In fact great harm may be the result when laws try to enforce their view of common or normal practices. Today we are much more aware of the personal harm we inflict when we deny or distain a transexual person from becoming the person they need to be. We must admit that Nature does make mistakes, especially when the genitalia of some babies are too badly formed so as to clearly define their sexuality and expect them to live with this ambivalence for the rest of their lives. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered persons need the freedom to become the persons they were meant to be. The medical and psychological disciplines are quite sure that LGBT people are who they understand themselves to be because it is part of who they really are.

Isn't it about time that we admit that diversity will always exist in our lives as humans and should we not therefore become more respectful and compassionate in helping those persons find their fulfillment in living as we each deserve? Being who we are, as long as it does not bring harm to ourselves or others, should never be a detriment in anyone's life. Our recent history of false judgements with regarding race, women's rights, child labor, and other issues might teach us to become more sensitive and aware of the extreme harm that we cause until such false judgements were changed. When we encourage and support people in becoming all that they need to be we all become winners.

May the caring peace of God that goes beyond human comprehension, declare God's love for you in your heart and mind as we see it in Jesus Christ; and may the blessing of God, loving Creator, gracious Liberator, and life giving Spirit keep you steadfast now and always. Amen.