

MARRIAGE

from the Bible alone

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Introduction

We've all heard plenty about marriage from the time we were born. Most Christians "know" that marriage is a monogamous union between one man and one woman, is formed by making vows and signing marriage licences, is an equal partnership between two individuals exclusively for life with the husband as the spiritual head, is the only valid place for sex, if either person has sex with anyone else they're committing adultery and must leave their lover and go back to their spouse alone, and both polygamy and homosexuality are equally sinful. We can even quote scripture that we believe backs this up (for instance Genesis 2, the creation of Adam and Eve).

We are so familiar with this doctrine that we are unable to distinguish which bits of it are directly from the Bible, and which bits are actually traditions that have originated over the past couple of thousand years. Whenever we read the Bible we see it through these glasses and interpret everything to fit into this mould that we already "know" is correct. And we don't even know we are doing that.

I want to show you how to find exactly what the Bible says about marriage. This will either confirm or contradict each detail of what you believe marriage is. But to do this you need first to take off your "what my parents and church taught me about marriage" glasses. If it helps, pretend you're an alien that's never heard of marriage and is reading about it for the first time, and the only book you have to find out about it is the Bible. I need you to read exactly what the Bible says and allow the Bible to interpret itself, to ensure you are getting your information on marriage directly from God's Word rather than from man's. We will clarify any questions that arise purely by finding other passages in scripture that answer those questions.

Once we've done that, we'll look back at our glasses and check how well they line up with God's Word. You can decide at the end whether you should put the glasses back on or not.

Glasses off? Ready to read the word of God alone? Let's open the Bible then!

I copy the key verses below, but I encourage you to open your own bible and read the context for each as we go along. I quote from the KJV simply because it is a reliable and widely accepted "word-for-word" translation with no copyright, but please refer to a sound modern translation such as the ESV or NASB if you find the language of the KJV difficult.

What is a "marriage"?

Genesis 2:18,21-24 *And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him. ... And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam 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. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.*

Here we have a very clear description of the first marriage. These would be the most commonly quoted verses on marriage in the entire Bible, and people use them to teach many different things about marriage. But today we're not applying this to our lives using the words of man, but using God's word. So our question should be, what messages does God wish to teach us from this account? Well, it turns out that this passage is referred to multiple times in scripture when teaching about marriage, so rather than relying on our own human reasoning we can easily find out exactly what the Bible has to say about it.

Matthew 19:3-9 *The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not*

read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. They say unto him, Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away? He saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so. And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.

Here Jesus was asked about divorce, and answered by referring to Genesis 2:24. He says that this passage teaches us:

- A husband and wife are joined together by God. Not just Adam and Eve, but He extends this to all marriages. God clearly cares a lot about marriage.
- Marriage should be permanent, because God has put it together.
- The husband and wife are so tightly joined they are considered "one flesh".
- Abandoning one spouse in favour of a new one constitutes "adultery". The crime is the breach of the first marriage, the divorce, as that is the topic of this discourse.
- However a husband is allowed to divorce his wife if she has already broken the marriage by committing adultery herself.

Note that this teaching is so important that the full account is also recorded in Mark 10:2-12, and a summarised version is presented in Matthew 5:31-32 and Luke 16:18 (read them all).

Paul also refers back to Genesis 2 in his teaching.

1 Corinthians 11:3,8-9 *But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God. ... For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man.*

1 Timothy 2:12-13 *But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve.*

These passages are currently unpopular, but they are in the Bible and very clear. Here we learn that marriage is a hierarchy. The man is the head of the marriage, for three distinct reasons: Eve was created from Adam, for Adam (as his helpmeet), and after Adam. Note that this means man was not placed in authority over Eve at the fall, but was in authority from the moment Eve was created, making this the original pattern for marriage that existed when God declared His creation "very good" (Genesis 1:31).

So according to Jesus, and the Holy Spirit through Paul, Genesis 2 teaches us that marriage is:

- a firm bond between a man and a woman,
- with the man in authority,
- that is established by God and not to be broken by humans.

What makes a couple "married"?

How is that marriage bond formed? Who decides that a couple can be married? God directly put Adam and Eve together, and declared them to be husband and wife Himself. How does it work for their descendants?

Exodus 22:16-17 *And if a man entice a maid that is not betrothed, and lie with her, he shall surely endow her to be his wife. If her father utterly refuse to give her unto him, he shall pay money according to the dowry of virgins.*

There is only one person in all of the Bible that is given authority over marriage: the father of the bride. Here he has complete control, even if the couple have already slept together he can forbid to give his daughter as the man's wife.

In God's system, all authority over marriage is patriarchal, it rests in the male head of the family. The bride is under her father's authority until he chooses to give her to a man in marriage. Once he does that, she is under her husband's authority instead.

This is shown in the few marriages we have recorded in detail in scripture.

Marriages in scripture

Genesis 24:34,37-38,49-59,67 *And he said, I am Abraham's servant. ... And my master made me swear, saying, Thou shalt not take a wife to my son of the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I dwell: But thou shalt go unto my father's house, and to my kindred, and take a wife unto my son. ... And now if ye will deal kindly and truly with my master, tell me: and if not, tell me; that I may turn to the right hand, or to the left. Then Laban and Bethuel answered and said, The thing proceedeth from the LORD: we cannot speak unto thee bad or good. Behold, Rebekah is before thee, take her, and go, and let her be thy master's son's wife, as the LORD hath spoken. And it came to pass, that, when Abraham's servant heard their words, he worshipped the LORD, bowing himself to the earth. And the servant brought forth jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and raiment, and gave them to Rebekah: he gave also to her brother and to her mother precious things. And they did eat and drink, he and the men that were with him, and tarried all night; and they rose up in the morning, and he said, Send me away unto my master. And her brother and her mother said, Let the damsel abide with us a few days, at the least ten; after that she shall go. And he said unto them, Hinder me not, seeing the LORD hath prospered my way; send me away that I may go to my master. And they said, We will call the damsel, and enquire at her mouth. And they called Rebekah, and said unto her, Wilt thou go with this man? And she said, I will go. And they sent away Rebekah their sister, and her nurse, and Abraham's servant, and his men. ... And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her: and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death*

Here Abraham's servant obtains Rebecca as a wife for Isaac. He takes her only after receiving the permission of her father and brother. Rebecca's input is sought on one detail - how soon she will leave. In verse 67, Isaac takes Rebecca into his tent and she becomes his wife. The only ingredients of the marriage are her father's permission, followed by her physical union with Isaac.

Genesis 29:15-30 *And Laban said unto Jacob, Because thou art my brother, shouldest thou therefore serve me for nought? tell me, what shall thy wages be? And Laban had two daughters: the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah was tender eyed; but Rachel was beautiful and well favoured. And Jacob loved Rachel; and said, I will serve thee seven years for Rachel thy younger daughter. And Laban said, It is better that I give her to thee, than that I should give her to another man: abide with me. And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her. And Jacob said unto Laban, Give me my wife, for my days are fulfilled, that I may go in unto her. And Laban gathered together all the men of the place, and made a feast. And it came to pass in the evening, that he took Leah his daughter, and brought her to him; and he went in unto her. And Laban gave unto his daughter Leah Zilpah his maid for an handmaid. And it came to pass, that in the morning, behold, it was Leah: and he said to Laban, What is this thou hast done unto me? did not I serve with thee for Rachel? wherefore then hast thou beguiled me? And Laban said, It must not be so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn. Fulfil her week, and we will give thee this also for the service which thou shalt serve with me yet seven other years. And Jacob did so, and fulfilled her week: and he gave him Rachel his daughter to wife also. And Laban gave to Rachel his daughter Bilhah his handmaid to be her maid. And he went in also unto Rachel, and he loved also Rachel more than Leah, and served with him yet seven other years.*

Although compounded by Laban's deception, the same elements are present in Jacob's marriages to Leah and Rachel: Laban chooses to give each of his daughters to Jacob (one deceptively, one openly, v19,23,28), Jacob physically unites with each woman (v23,30), and they are married. In this case Laban also throws a party.

The deuterocanonical book of Tobit describes a marriage in more detail, so for the sake of completeness I will include this here also, to demonstrate that regardless of whether we use a Protestant or a Catholic bible for this study the message is the same. I make no judgement on whether Tobit is scripture, you decide what weight you place on this account. Tobit chapters 7 and 8 describe the wedding of Tobias to Sara. Raphael / Azarias is Tobias' companion, who asks for Sara on Tobias' behalf, and Raguel is Sara's father:

Tobit 7:8-17 ... *Then said Tobias to Raphael, Brother Azarias, speak of those things of which thou didst talk in the way, and let this business be dispatched. So he communicated the matter with Raguel: and Raguel said to Tobias, Eat and drink, and make merry: For it is meet that thou shouldest marry my daughter ... But Tobias said, I will eat nothing here, till we agree and swear one to another. Raguel said, Then take her from henceforth according to the manner, for thou art her cousin, and she is thine, and the merciful God give you good success in all things. Then he called his daughter Sara, and she came to her father, and he took her by the hand, and gave her to be wife to Tobias, saying, Behold, take her after the law of Moses, and lead her away to thy father. And he blessed them; And called Edna his wife, and took paper, and did write an instrument of covenants, and sealed it. Then they began to eat. After Raguel called his wife Edna, and said unto her, Sister, prepare another chamber, and bring her in thither. Which when she had done as he had bidden her, she brought her thither ...*

8:1,4-9,19 *And when they had supped, they brought Tobias in unto her. ... And after that they were both shut in together, Tobias rose out of the bed, and said, Sister, arise, and let us pray that God would have pity on us. Then began Tobias to say, Blessed art thou, O God of our fathers, and blessed is thy holy and glorious name for ever; let the heavens bless thee, and all thy creatures. Thou madest Adam, and gavest him Eve his wife for an helper and stay: of them came mankind: thou hast said, It is not good that man should be alone; let us make unto him an aid like unto himself. And now, O Lord, I take not this my sister for lush but uprightly: therefore mercifully ordain that we may become aged together. And she said with him, Amen. So they slept both that night. ... And he kept the wedding feast fourteen days.*

Tobias asks Sara's father (7:8), who agrees and gives her to Tobias (7:12-13), and also writes this down for a permanent record. Tobias and Sara pray together, thanking God for marriage and for Sara (8:4-8), and sleep together that very night (8:9). They then hold a 14 day long wedding feast (8:19), and another 7 day long wedding feast when Tobias takes Sara back to his own father's house (11:19).

In all three cases, the bride's father agrees to give her to the husband, they sleep together, and are married. Once they are married there is a celebration, called a "wedding feast" or simply a "wedding", which generally lasts 7 days (Genesis 29:27, Tobit 11:19) but could last longer (Tobit 8:19). The feast may however start just before the marriage is consummated (e.g. Jacob and Leah - note that given the unusual circumstances that may not be typical, it may have simply been so Laban could get Jacob drunk enough to not notice he was sleeping with Leah instead of Rachel, I can't imagine him making that mistake sober...). The wedding feast is mentioned briefly as a minor detail, it does not make the couple married but is simply a celebration of the fact that they are married.

Note what is missing: Obviously none of these weddings involves signing marriage licences from the government of the day. But also, none of them even involves a priest. The wedding is not religious at all - the only religious element mentioned in these three examples is when Tobias and Sara choose to pray together on their wedding night. Search the regulations given for priests in the Old Testament, or church ministers in the New: nowhere is any religious authority instructed to

officiate weddings. That isn't even considered or hinted at. Although God has joined them together (Matthew 19:6), He doesn't need a priest or minister to do that, He just does it Himself. In every example in the Bible, whether you use a Protestant or Catholic version, marriage is simply an agreement between the husband and the father of the bride, nobody else is involved.

Very simple. But hang on, earlier we saw that marriage was a union between a man, and a woman. But we've just read about Jacob marrying two wives. So what about polygamy? Was Jacob actually married to these two women, or not? Was he doing right, or sinning?

Polygamy

Jacob's not the only polygamist in the Bible. As you read through the Old Testament, you will find many of the key Godly men throughout history were polygamous, for example:

- Abraham: Both Sarah and Hagar are each called his "wife" (Genesis 16:3), and Genesis 25:6 mentions "the concubines which Abraham had"
- Jacob: Actually had four wives in the end, also taking Bilhah as a "wife" in Genesis 30:4, and Zilpah in 30:9. Leah, Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah are each called Jacob's "wife". Although 6 of Jacob's sons were from his first wife Leah, the other 6 were from Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah, and all 12 were considered equally legitimate, forming the 12 tribes of Israel.
- Moses: At least 3 wives: Zipporah (Exodus 2:21); an Ethiopian woman (Numbers 12:1); and another unnamed Midianite woman, daughter of a man called Hobab who was not Zipporah's father (Numbers 10:29, Judges 4:11).
- Caleb (the faithful spy, companion to Joshua): One wife and two concubines (1 Chronicles 2:42-49) - we know this is the good Caleb in question as his daughter Acsah is mentioned in this genealogy and in Joshua 15 and Judges 1.
- Gideon: Had "many wives", who bore him 70 sons (Judges 8:30)
- Elkanah (father of Samuel): Two wives (1 Samuel 1:2).
- King David: Took many wives, for instance 2 Samuel 3:2-5 and 2 Samuel 5:13.
- King Solomon: 1000 wives, categorised into "queens" & "concubines" (1 Kings 11:3)
- King Joash: At least two wives (2 Chronicles 24:3)

And countless others.

(Note that in some of these examples, some of their women are called "concubines", while others are called "wives" (or "queens" in the case of kings). The words "concubine" and "wife" are used interchangeably in scripture, for instance Bilhah is called Jacob's "wife" in Genesis 30:4, and his "concubine" in 35:22. A man with a concubine is called her "husband", and her father is called his "father-in-law" (e.g. Judges 19:1-4). Although some modern preachers will interpret "concubines" as being some sort of immoral fling or mistress, this is not scriptural. A concubine is a wife. However where a slave was taken as a wife, she was often referred to as a "concubine" to denote her different legal status from a free woman. This distinction is irrelevant to this discussion.)

Consider also that the Bible rarely mentions wives at all, mainly talking about men. We only know men were polygamous when there happens to be a reason to mention more than one of their wives, for most men in the Bible we have no idea how many wives they had, and even when only one is mentioned we cannot be certain that that is their only wife (for instance, we read how Boaz married Ruth, but are not told if he had any other wives). Most genealogies only mention sons and sometimes say the name of their mother, so sometimes when a man has sons to multiple wives we can see them recorded in scripture (e.g. Caleb), but we have no record of wives who had only daughters or no children. Given the lack of information on wives it is quite likely that many more key scriptural characters were polygamous. But even from the few wives who are mentioned we can certainly see that polygamy was very widespread among those who are called faithful followers of God.

Of the 14 men mentioned by name in Hebrews 11 as exceedingly faithful, at least 5 were polygamous (Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Gideon, David), one was monogamous (Noah), and there is no information on the others' wives.

How can this be, if marriage is a relationship between one man and one woman, who become one flesh? (Genesis 2:24) Were these men all sinning in being polygamous? Let's check the Bible.

2 Chronicles 24:3-4 *And Joash did that which was right in the sight of the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the priest. And Jehoiada took for him two wives; and he begat sons and daughters.*

So, while doing "that which was right in the sight of the Lord", Joash took two wives. In fact, he was GIVEN two wives by Jehoiada, the high priest, someone who was an even more faithful servant of God than Joash as it was he who kept Joash on the straight and narrow (Joash turned away from wholeheartedly serving God after Jehoiada's death). Clearly his two wives were "right in the sight of the Lord".

1 Kings 15:5 *Because David did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord, and turned not aside from any thing that he commanded him all the days of his life, save only in the matter of Uriah the Hittite.*

The "matter of Uriah the Hittite" is when David committed adultery by sleeping with Uriah's wife Bathsheba, then had Uriah killed so he could take Bathsheba as his own wife. This is said to be sinful here, and this act was heavily punished at the time by God also. But apart from this, David also is said to have done "that which was right in the eyes of the Lord". As God was quite willing to criticise David when he did commit adultery with Bathsheba, he would have also criticised his other marriages if they also constituted adultery. But He did not. Clearly those other marriages were not adultery, they were not sinful.

Genesis 20:2-6 *And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, She is my sister: and Abimelech king of Gerar sent, and took Sarah. But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, Behold, thou art but a dead man, for the woman which thou hast taken; for she is a man's wife. But Abimelech had not come near her: and he said, Lord, wilt thou slay also a righteous nation? Said he not unto me, She is my sister? and she, even she herself said, He is my brother: in the integrity of my heart and innocency of my hands have I done this. And God said unto him in a dream, Yea, I know that thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart; for I also withheld thee from sinning against me: therefore suffered I thee not to touch her.*

Here Abimelech planned to take Sarah as an additional wife, although he was already married (Genesis 20:17). He did not know that Sarah was Abraham's wife, so taking her would be adultery. He stated "in the integrity of my heart and innocency of my hands have I done this". And God agreed with him - "I know that thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart". Read that again. God clearly stated that Abimelech's intent to take a second wife had "integrity", it was not sinful. Only the fact that Sarah was already married would make taking her sinful, and as Abimelech didn't know this he was acting with "integrity". God approved of Abimelech's desire to add an additional wife! Just not his desire to take that particular woman.

Polygamy was practised by many Godly men, and is shown very clearly to not be sinful.

So how does this work, if marriage is between a man and a woman? What does it mean to be "one flesh" - how is that term defined by the Bible?

The term "one flesh" is mentioned 6 times in the Bible - Genesis 2:24 (the first marriage), Matthew 19:5,6 and Mark 10:8 (Jesus' teaching on divorce), and two we haven't looked at yet: 1 Cor 6:16 and Ephesians 5:31.

1 Cor 6:15-17 *Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ? shall I then take the*

members of Christ, and make them the members of an harlot? God forbid. What? know ye not that he which is joined to an harlot is one body? for two, saith he, shall be one flesh. But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit.

Consider this carefully. Clearly if an unmarried man sleeps with a harlot, he becomes "one flesh" with her, just as he would if he married her. What if a married man, who is already "one flesh" with his wife, sleeps with a harlot? Does he become "one flesh" with the harlot as well? He must, this passage is not addressed only to single men, but to all. So the married man who sleeps with a harlot is now "one flesh" with his wife, and "one flesh" with the harlot. He is "one flesh" with two separate women.

The "one flesh" relationship is not limited to a monogamous couple only. It isn't about limitation of marriage to just one man and one woman, but rather about closeness of relationship. A man and his wife are so close that they are called "one flesh".

In verse 17 we see that just as a Christian man is "one flesh" with his wife, he is also "one spirit" with the Lord. The "one flesh" relationship is the physical reflection of the "one spirit" relationship we have with the Lord. If we can understand our relationship with a spouse, we can understand our relationship with God. Marriage has been given to us to help us to understand a far more important truth.

Ephesians 5:22-33: *Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband.*

This passage does teach us about the relationship between a husband and wife, but that isn't the primary purpose of it. It is actually written to teach us about the relationship between "Christ and the church". "One flesh" is first and foremost a reflection of our relationship with Christ.

1 Cor 6:17 states that *"he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit"*. It does not say that just the church as a collective is one spirit with the Lord, but that every single believer is individually one spirit with Him. So I am one spirit with the Lord, my wife is one spirit with the Lord, my son is one spirit with the Lord... It doesn't matter how many people come to Christ, each is still one spirit with the Lord. Every single one of us can have that incredibly close relationship. This is amazing.

Ephesians 5:32 states that it is *"Christ and the church"* who are joined in this way. This is generally interpreted to mean that "the church" as a collective is the one, monogamous bride of Christ, and each of us are simply members of His single bride. This seems to disagree with 1 Cor 6:17, so we need to look carefully at what "the church" is.

The original Greek word for "church" is "ekklesia". This means essentially "a gathering or an assembly of people" (check a concordance for a more detailed definition). It is not a word meaning a single individual, or even a formally organised structure. It just means a group of individuals. It is a plural word - a flock of sheep, a herd of cows, a church of people. So Ephesians 5:32 is applying this to "Christ and the many individual people who follow Him".

So we are each "one spirit" with Christ. We have an incredibly close relationship with Him. However many other people become Christians, we will still have the same "one spirit" relationship with Christ, and the new Christians will each have their own "one spirit" relationship with Him also. We don't have to approach Christ through a priest or any other mediator, but can approach Him directly, and incredibly closely. We aren't just joined to Him through being in His church, but He actually cares about and is joined to each of us individually. What an incredible, generous, loving and personal God we serve!

As this parallels marriage, we can also see that a wife is "one flesh" with her husband. She has an incredibly close relationship with him. Even if he takes another wife as well, she will still have the same "one flesh" relationship with him - and the new wife will have her own "one flesh" relationship with him also.

Homosexuality

So if monogamy is marriage, and polygamy is marriage, what about gay marriage? There are two separate parts to this question:

1. Is homosexuality a sin? This is off-topic so I won't get distracted by it here, I will cover that in another article.
2. Can a homosexual union be a "marriage"? That is the real issue here, and has a very simple answer, regardless of whether homosexuality is sinful or not.

Genesis 2:24 *Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.*

Marriage involves a "man" and a "wife". No homosexual union involves both of those, so no homosexual union is a "marriage".

This has nothing to do with the sinfulness or otherwise of homosexuality. It is completely fine for a ram and a ewe to mate, but that physical relationship is not "marriage" because it is not a man and a wife. It is completely fine for two male university students to flat together, but that living arrangement is not "marriage" as it doesn't involve a man and a wife. Conversely, an abusive marriage would be sinful, but still a "marriage". The question of whether something is marriage is completely separate to the question of whether something is sinful.

We can know for certain that a homosexual union is not a marriage, without getting into the question of sin at all.

Adultery

Adultery is a very serious sin, serious enough to be included in the 10 Commandments (Exodus 20:14). Earlier we touched on when David committed adultery with Bathsheba (1 Samuel 11), and showed that while David was able to have many wives without committing adultery, when he slept with Bathsheba that was adultery. So what is adultery?

If we look at every time the word "adultery" is used in scripture where we are told who the person is committing adultery with, we quickly see a common pattern.

Leviticus 20:10 *And the man that committeth adultery with another man's wife, even he that committeth adultery with his neighbour's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.*

Jeremiah 29:23 *Because they have committed villany in Israel, and have committed adultery with their neighbours' wives, and have spoken lying words in my name, which I have not commanded*

them; even I know, and am a witness, saith the Lord.

Ezekiel 16:32 *But as a wife that committeth adultery, which taketh strangers instead of her husband!*

Hosea 4:13 *They sacrifice upon the tops of the mountains, and burn incense upon the hills, under oaks and poplars and elms, because the shadow thereof is good: therefore your daughters shall commit whoredom, and your spouses shall commit adultery.* Note here that the word "spouses" is the Hebrew "kallah", which is a feminine noun and refers to a bride, young wife, or daughter-in-law (check any concordance).

In every case, a married woman is involved. Adultery is when a married woman has sex with a man who is not her husband (you may confirm that definition using any concordance). Although in our culture we define adultery as when a married man or woman has sex with someone other than their spouse, that is not Biblical, adultery in the Bible always involves a married woman. This is very clearly defined in:

Deuteronomy 22:22 *If a man be found lying with a woman married to an husband, then they shall both of them die, both the man that lay with the woman, and the woman: so shalt thou put away evil from Israel.*

In the following verses, we see that even if the woman was only betrothed, the penalty was still the same, sleeping with a betrothed woman was also considered adultery (Deuteronomy 22:23-27). "Betrothed" does not mean "engaged". Engagement is a modern western idea that does not appear in scripture, an engaged couple strongly intend to marry but still might change their minds. In Biblical times, betrothal was a firm commitment, so strong that the woman was considered to be essentially married even though she hadn't slept with her husband yet.

David was not committing adultery by sleeping with his wives, as they were not married to anyone else. However he did commit adultery with Bathsheba, because she was Uriah's wife (1 Kings 15:5).

So why is this applied to women only, not men? We can understand this more by looking at the parallel sin of covetousness:

Exodus 20:17 *Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's.*

Here we see another Biblical concept that is offensive to modern culture: the wife belongs to her husband. She is listed here alongside his house and his ox as one of his possessions. A man is not to covet his neighbour's possessions, as to covet is to want to take. If he took these things from his neighbour he would be breaching Exodus 20:15 ("Thou shalt not steal"). And if he took his neighbour's wife he would be breaching Exodus 20:14 ("Thou shalt not commit adultery"). So we are not to take what belongs to our neighbour, or desire to take what belongs to our neighbour.

Jesus explained this well in Matthew 5:27-28: *"Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart."* Note here that the Greek word for "woman" can refer to either any woman or specifically to a married woman. As we have already seen that adultery is sleeping with a married woman, not an unmarried woman, by using the term "adultery" Jesus is specifically referring to lust after a married woman. And he says that that is wrong as it is a desire to commit adultery. Once again, we must neither take what belongs to our neighbour, or desire to take what belongs to our neighbour, either is equally sinful.

Sex with another man's wife is taking something that belongs to someone else, so is sin. However if

a man has two of his own wives, he is not committing adultery by sleeping with them, as they don't belong to anybody else.

Polyandry

The word "polygamy" refers to either "polygyny", one man with multiple wives, or "polyandry", one woman with multiple husbands. We have seen that a man can have multiple wives without committing adultery, and many Godly men did so throughout scripture. So can a woman have multiple husbands?

Deuteronomy 22:22 *If a man be found lying with a woman married to an husband, then they shall both of them die, both the man that lay with the woman, and the woman: so shalt thou put away evil from Israel.*

If two men marry the same woman, each of them would be committing adultery by sleeping with her, as she is the wife of another man. Polyandry is therefore forbidden, while polygyny is allowed.

Homosexuality is not marriage, as it doesn't involve a man and a woman. Polyandry IS marriage, but it is an adulterous and therefore forbidden form of marriage. Monogamy and polygyny are the only allowable forms of marriage in scripture.

Sex outside of marriage

So what about if a married man has sex with a single woman who is not his wife? If that isn't adultery, what is it? Is the Bible saying a man, even a married man, is free to sleep with anyone he likes provided they aren't someone's wife? Certainly not.

Exodus 22:16-17 *And if a man entice a maid that is not betrothed, and lie with her, he shall surely endow her to be his wife. If her father utterly refuse to give her unto him, he shall pay money according to the dowry of virgins. See also Deuteronomy 22:28-29*

If a man sleeps with an unmarried woman, he is commanded to take her as his wife.

Sex alone does not constitute marriage. The verse does not say "And if a man ... lie with her, she is now his wife". Rather, he is commanded to take her as his wife. She isn't his wife yet. Earlier we saw that marriage consisted of an agreement between the husband and the wife's father (betrothal), followed by the husband and wife sleeping together (consummation, turning the betrothal into marriage). Here the man has only done one of those things - he's slept with her, but he didn't have the approval of her father. He now has to obtain her father's approval to take her as his wife.

He is commanded to "endow" her to be his wife - in other words, pay a dowry to her father. He has to not only get her father to say it is ok to marry her, but he has to pay the bride price he would have had to pay in the first place if he'd done the right thing and approached her father first.

Finally, her father still has full authority to refuse. If the father doesn't think the man is suitable husband material, then he still has to pay the dowry, but doesn't get a wife at all! So there is a risk of harsh financial punishment for a man sleeping with a woman without first obtaining the permission of her father.

Clearly if a single man sleeps with an unmarried woman, all of this applies. What about if a married man sleeps with an unmarried woman? Neither Exodus 22 or Deuteronomy 22 say that this applies only to single men. It applies to all men. If a married man sleeps with an unmarried woman, he is required to take her as his wife. Under this law, if a married man has an affair with a single woman, he is required to become a polygamist, provided her father agrees (note that as God would never require someone to sin, this again shows that polygamy is not sinful).

Now note that this applies only to sleeping with "a maid". The word "maid" is the Hebrew "bethulah", which is generally translated "virgin". It is generally taken to mean a woman who has never had sex with a man. It does not apply to an unmarried woman who has had sex previously. Why is this? Why isn't a man required to marry any woman he has sex with, but only a virgin?

Consider the implications of this. Let's imagine this verse stated "And if a man entice an unmarried woman, and lie with her, he shall surely endow her to be his wife." Now imagine a woman who makes a mistake, sleeps with one man, hides it from her father and breaks up with him. Then she sleeps with a second man. Then her father finds out about both of them. Now, the first is required to marry her. And the second is also required to marry her. So two men are required to marry the same woman. They are required to be polyandrous. But we have already seen that polyandry is forbidden, because it would be adultery for either to sleep with her. If they were both required to marry her, the law would be requiring them to sin. God never requires sin.

Instead, God has kept this very simple. The man who took her virginity is required to marry her unless her father refuses. If her father refuses, he must still pay the dowry as he took her virginity. Her father may allow someone else to actually marry her if he prefers. Nobody is required to sin.

However the flip-side of this is that there is no punishment specified for the man who sleeps with a non-virgin single woman, and this is not even said to be a sin (please hunt and try to prove me wrong, it makes me uncomfortable too, but that's all I can find in the word of God). Here we must remember 1 Corinthians 6:12 "*All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient*" - just because there isn't specifically a law against something doesn't mean it's a good idea. We can see that God desires marriage for a woman. The woman who has had her virginity taken by an unsuitable man is still a woman with the same needs that she had when she was a virgin - she still deserves marriage. Although only the man that took her virginity is required to marry her, we can certainly see that God desires marriage for her, and the man who chooses to sleep with her without marrying her is not acting in accordance with the spirit of God's Word, even if he has avoided falling afoul of the letter of it.

1 Cor 7:1-2 *Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband.*

God desires marriage so much for the non-virgin that the Bible does require it in one specific case, and strongly recommends it elsewhere.

Deuteronomy 25:5 *If brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry without unto a stranger: her husband's brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him to wife, and perform the duty of an husband's brother unto her.*

The primary purpose for this as outlined in the following verses (6-10) is to provide an heir for her husband. But consider also that in a society with no social welfare a widow requires children to support her in her old age. This law provides her with a husband and children. As an aside, once again this does not apply only to single brothers, if all the deceased man's brothers were married one would be required to become a polygamist.

In 1 Timothy 5:3-16 we read how the church is to provide for widows. A few select elderly widows may be supported by the church (9-10), but most are to be supported by children or nephews (4,8,16), and younger widows are to remarry (14). God desires marriage for women, to use a woman without marrying her is not following God's will.

So if marriage in the Bible doesn't ever involve the government or even a priest / minister, how would a man take a woman he has already slept with to be his wife? How would marriage differ from just continuing to sleep with her outside of marriage? Apart from the consent of her father, there is one other critical thing that characterises marriage:

Matthew 19:6 *Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.*

Permanence. Commitment. That is the fundamental difference between marriage and casual sex. A man who is using a woman for sex outside of marriage offers her none of that. An honourable man who takes a woman as his wife obtains the consent of her father where relevant (see below) and offers her full, permanent commitment.

Roles within marriage

So far we have basically looked at what marriage is and how it is formed. How should marriage function?

Near the start of this article we read Paul's teaching on the roles of men and women from Genesis 2:

1 Corinthians 11:3,8-9 *But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God. ... For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man.*

This is expanded on as more practical instructions for husbands and wives elsewhere:

Ephesians 5:22-33 *Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband.*

1 Peter 3:1-7 *Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives; While they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear. Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price. For after this manner in the old time the holy women also, who trusted in God, adorned themselves, being in subjection unto their own husbands: Even as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord: whose daughters ye are, as long as ye do well, and are not afraid with any amazement. Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered.*

The marriage relationship reflects our relationship with God. Just as a Christian obeys Christ as Lord, which means master, a wife is to obey her husband "in every thing" (Ephesians 5:24). A husband is to love his wife just as Christ loves the church - so much that he is willing to give his life for her just as Christ gave Himself for us (Ephesians 5:25). This order in marriage flows directly from the creation of mankind and the first marriage in Genesis 2. Note that this means it was established before the fall, it is not a result of the fall but is God's original plan for mankind.

The roles of husband and wife are well balanced. Although the wife must obey her husband in everything, he is to love her, so he must not command her to do anything that would be unloving.

Although the husband must love his wife so much he would be willing to die for her, she must still obey him, so he must not interpret "love" to mean "do everything she wants". When both are following their roles, you will not have either an abused wife or a henpecked husband.

This hierarchical view of marriage is so deeply ingrained in scripture that it lies behind the language used wherever marriage is mentioned, for instance:

1 Cor 7:2 ...*let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband.*

Here the English word "own" is used twice. However in the Greek, these are actually two different words. We use the word "own" to refer to both things that belong to us, and things that are associated with us, but in Greek those two meanings are separated. This verse states that each man is to have his "heautou" wife. "Heautou" is almost always translated "himself", "themselves" etc, and refers to the person themselves or something belonging to them alone. However the wife is to have her "idios" husband. "Idios" means "pertaining to one's self" and does not imply ownership, for instance it is used in Luke 2:3 where it says that everyone went to "his own city" to be taxed - the city does not belong to the person, but is associated with them, and in fact many different people can refer to that city as their "own". So a man is to have his own wife who belongs to him and whom he is the head of, while a woman is to have a husband who is associated with her but does not necessarily belong exclusively to her.

Ending a marriage - Death

Romans 7:1-3 *Know ye not, brethren, (for I speak to them that know the law,) how that the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth? For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man.*

Matthew 22:23-30 *The same day came to him the Sadducees, which say that there is no resurrection, and asked him, Saying, Master, Moses said, If a man die, having no children, his brother shall marry his wife, and raise up seed unto his brother. Now there were with us seven brethren: and the first, when he had married a wife, deceased, and, having no issue, left his wife unto his brother: Likewise the second also, and the third, unto the seventh. And last of all the woman died also. Therefore in the resurrection whose wife shall she be of the seven? for they all had her. Jesus answered and said unto them, Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven.*

Marriage ceases at death. The marriage is not restored in the resurrection, but life is rather different then, earthly marriage is irrelevant. The focus becomes our relationship with God, of which earthly marriage is just a pale reflection - and given how wonderful that pale reflection can be, we should really look forward to the day we are finally in heaven living the real thing!

Ending a marriage - Divorce

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 *When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house. And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife. And if the latter husband hate her, and write her a bill of divorcement, and giveth it in her hand, and sendeth her out of his house; or if the latter husband die, which took her to be his wife; Her former husband, which sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after that she is defiled; for that is abomination before the LORD: and thou shalt not cause the land to sin, which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an*

inheritance.

Why may a man divorce his wife? *"Because he hath found some uncleanness in her"* (v1). The Hebrew for 'uncleanness' here is 'er-vaw', and can mean nakedness or genital exposure, implying that the husband has found the wife to be sexually immoral.

Once divorced, the woman is free to remarry. She is completely separated from her husband, so much that not only can she remarry, but if she does she can never return to the first.

Matthew 19:3-9 *The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. They say unto him, Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away? He saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so. And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.*

Jesus was not asked "is it lawful for a man to put away his wife", but rather "is it lawful for a man to put away his wife FOR EVERY CAUSE". The question was about why a man can divorce his wife, not whether he can. Jesus' answer was not that a man can never divorce his wife, but rather that he should only divorce her "for fornication". It sounds like he is contradicting Moses, but the teaching he gives is actually quite well aligned with Moses' teaching. In both cases divorce is allowed in the case of sexual immorality. Jesus just stresses that divorce should be highly exceptional as marriage is intended to be permanent.

Note that if a woman sleeps with a man who is not her husband she has broken the marriage commitment herself. The Mosaic penalty for this was death. Divorce is really the husband confirming that the marriage bond has already been severed by the wife, and is a lot more merciful than applying the Mosaic penalty.

Jeremiah 3:8 *And I saw, when for all the causes whereby backsliding Israel committed adultery I had put her away, and given her a bill of divorce.*

Remember that marriage parallels our relationship with God. In this chapter God describes Israel and Judah as His two wives (v14). In v8 God describes how he divorced Israel for her spiritual adultery, showing that divorce is just in the case of adultery as even God Himself used it. Note that God is merciful also, He doesn't destroy Israel completely for her adultery (despite death being the just punishment in Mosaic law), but only divorces her.

1 Corinthians 7:10-15 *And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife. But to the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy. But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace.*

Here we are again instructed not to divorce (10-11). But at the same time we are instructed that if your spouse chooses to divorce you, let them, and you are completely free ("not under bondage", v15).

Malachi 2:14-16 "... Because the Lord hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant. And did not he make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? That he might seek a godly seed. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth. For the Lord, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away ... "

Other translations render v16 *"I hate divorce"*. This is a very clear statement from God.

Church leaders in the New Testament are to model this faithfulness to their wives.

1 Timothy 3:2 *"A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach;"* See also v12 and Titus 1:6.

Note that regardless of how these verses are to be understood, they only relate to church leaders, they are a command to them specifically not to all men. However even though they have this limited application, if these passages meant that a church leader must have "only one" wife, they would be the only time such a statement is made anywhere in scripture, and would appear to be in contradiction to other verses even in the New Testament that clearly allow for polygamy (e.g. 1 Cor 7:2 as explained above). Where scripture appears to be in conflict we must look to the original language. Then we will soon see that there is no conflict in scripture, and will learn what God really wishes to teach us from the passage.

In all of these cases the word for "one" is the Greek "mia", which is NOT the Greek numeral one ("heis"). Mia can be translated as "one", "a" or "first" depending on the context, for instance Matthew 28:1 states that the women went to the tomb on the "mia" day of the week, the "first" day of the week - that doesn't mean that it was the "only day" of the week, but "day 1" of the week.

- Paul could be saying here that a bishop is to have "only one" wife, however "mia" does not imply "only". If Paul intended to say "only one" he could have used the numeral "heis" instead. Furthermore such a translation would be contradictory to many other scriptures mentioned above that accept polygyny.
- He could mean that a bishop is to have "a" or "at least one" wife, i.e. be married, as a married man has the experience of running a household that he can apply to running the church. But note that Paul himself was unmarried, and elsewhere extols the benefits of celibacy (1 Cor 7:7,32,34), so he would also be contradicting himself if he were now requiring marriage for church leaders when he didn't require it for himself as an apostle.
- Rather, as scripture is full of instructions against divorce, the meaning that is most consistent with this is that a bishop must be the husband of his "first" wife. So, if married, he is to be someone who has proven himself faithful to the wife of his youth by not divorcing her (Malachi 2:14-15), so will also be faithful to the church. This isn't about the number of wives (either "only one" or "at least one"), but rather about an example of faithfulness to "wife number one".

So essentially we are told:

1. Marriage is a permanent union, established by God, don't break it. Church leaders in particular are to model this firm commitment.
2. But if your wife chooses to break it by committing adultery, or your husband or wife chooses to break the marriage by leaving, let them go, you may divorce, and are completely free to remarry.

Authority over a remarriage

We have seen to this point that a man must obtain the consent of a woman's father before he can take her as his wife. But every example we have actually seen where that occurred was the marriage of a virgin daughter, and the laws around it also relate to virgins. What about if an older widow or divorcee wishes to remarry, must she still obtain the consent of her father? What if her father is dead?

Deuteronomy 24:1-2 *When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house. And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife.*

There is no mention here of her needing to obtain anyone's consent to marry, either that of her father or of her former husband. Rather we are just told "she may go and be another man's wife".

Ruth 3:7-10 *And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of corn: and she came softly, and uncovered his feet, and laid her down. And it came to pass at midnight, that the man was afraid, and turned himself: and, behold, a woman lay at his feet. And he said, Who art thou? And she answered, I am Ruth thine handmaid: spread therefore thy skirt over thine handmaid; for thou art a near kinsman. And he said, Blessed be thou of the Lord, my daughter: for thou hast shewed more kindness in the latter end than at the beginning, inasmuch as thou followedst not young men, whether poor or rich.*

Who requested the marriage? The widow Ruth did. She didn't seek the permission of her father first, he was back in Moab. And the discussions that follow this between Boaz and the other men of the town relate to which man is entitled to take her as a wife, not obtaining the permission of her father. Neither Ruth nor Boaz sought her father's permission, she acted on her own behalf.

Numbers 30:3-9 *If a woman also vow a vow unto the Lord, and bind herself by a bond, being in her father's house in her youth; And her father hear her vow, and her bond wherewith she hath bound her soul, and her father shall hold his peace at her; then all her vows shall stand, and every bond wherewith she hath bound her soul shall stand. But if her father disallow her in the day that he heareth; not any of her vows, or of her bonds wherewith she hath bound her soul, shall stand: and the Lord shall forgive her, because her father disallowed her. And if she had at all an husband, when she vowed, or uttered ought out of her lips, wherewith she bound her soul; And her husband heard it, and held his peace at her in the day that he heard it: then her vows shall stand, and her bonds wherewith she bound her soul shall stand. But if her husband disallowed her on the day that he heard it; then he shall make her vow which she vowed, and that which she uttered with her lips, wherewith she bound her soul, of none effect: and the Lord shall forgive her. But every vow of a widow, and of her that is divorced, wherewith they have bound their souls, shall stand against her.*

A young woman living in her father's house is under the authority of her father. A wife is under the authority of her husband. But a widow or divorcee is not under the authority of anybody, but is her own authority.

This is because the woman is under the authority of her father first. When she marries, he consents to hand his authority over to the husband. Now the father has no authority over her, the husband has authority instead. When the husband dies, or divorces her, nobody is over her. She is now her own authority, unless she chooses herself to marry and thereby hand that authority to a new husband.

Summary of Biblical marriage

Simply, marriage is a relationship between a man and a woman, with the man as the head, that is intended to be for life.

In detail:

- Marriage is between a man and a woman, who become one flesh (Genesis 2:24)
- Marriage parallels our relationship with God (1 Cor 6:16-17)
- Marriage is formed by agreement between a man and:
 - the father of the bride, if she is a virgin (Exodus 22:16-17)
 - the woman herself, if she is a widow or divorcee (Numbers 30:9)
- The husband is in authority over the wife (Ephesians 5:22-33)
 - He must love her so much that he would be willing to die for her (v25)
 - She must obey him in everything (v24)
 - These commands balance each other out, preventing abuse by either spouse, while providing an organised structure for the family.
- A man may have more than one marriage, to more than one wife (e.g. 2 Chronicles 24:3-4)
- It is sinful for a man to sleep with the wife of another man - this is adultery (Deuteronomy 22:22)
- Homosexuality is not marriage (Genesis 2:24), and polyandry is forbidden as adulterous (Deuteronomy 22:22)
- Marriage ends at death (Romans 7:1-3)
- We are not to end a marriage ourselves through divorce, but can divorce when our spouse has broken the marriage themselves (Matthew 19:3-9)

Re-examining traditional marriage

At the start of this article, I summarised the traditional view: "Marriage is a monogamous union between one man and one woman, is formed by making vows and signing marriage licences, is an equal partnership between two individuals exclusively for life with the husband as the spiritual head, is the only valid place for sex, if either person has sex with anyone else they're committing adultery and must leave their lover and go back to their spouse alone, and both polygamy and homosexuality are equally sinful."

Let us now examine that in the light of scripture.

"Marriage is a monogamous union between one man and one woman" Marriage is a union between a man and a woman, but is not necessarily monogamous, as a man may have more than one marriage.

"is formed by making vows and signing marriage licences" Never once in scripture does it mention either vows or licences, whether issued by the church or the government. Marriage is purely presented as an agreement between either the husband and the father of the bride, or between the husband and the bride herself if she is a widow or divorcee. Never is a priest or church minister instructed to officiate weddings, and never is there any example of them doing so.

"is an equal partnership between two individuals ... with the husband as the spiritual head" The Bible never says "spiritual head". The word "spiritual" has been slipped into the vocabulary by modern preachers purely to water down the clear words of scripture. The Bible simply says that the husband is the "head", and that the wife is to obey him in "everything" (Ephesians 5:24). He isn't some spiritual figurehead, he is the real, practical, head and leader of his entire family, including his wife. Marriage is not an "equal partnership" - it is a relationship between equals, in that both husband and wife are equally valuable to God, but both have very different roles within that relationship so it cannot be described as an "equal partnership".

A marriage is like a company, with the husband as the CEO and the wife as (for example) the accountant. Both the CEO and the accountant are equally important, as people. But the CEO is the boss. His job is to run the company, which includes telling the accountant what to do. The accountant is to obey him. She may advise him (e.g. "opening a branch in Singapore would be unprofitable"), but he can choose to follow or ignore that advice. However the CEO is not

ultimately the owner of the company, or his accountant. He too is an employee - he works for the board of directors, who represent the shareholders who actually own the company. The board sets the direction and tells the CEO what to do (e.g. "Increase sales into Singapore"). The CEO decides the detail of how to do that ("Should we open a physical branch, or just improve our website and remote marketing?"). The accountant follows those instructions ("Work out the cost-benefit of a branch versus a better website").

In the same way, God sets the direction for the family (e.g. "Teach the Gospel"). The husband determines the detail of what that will mean for his family based on his understanding of scripture and God's calling on their individual lives (where they should live, work, attend church & school, what ministry they should do etc). The wife is to help him take the family in that direction, supporting her husband implement his understanding of God's will for their family.

"exclusively" A wife may not sleep with anyone other than her husband. However a husband may take more than one wife, and countless Godly men did so. In fact, as soon as you start looking at marriage in any depth in scripture polygyny is everywhere you look. The Song of Solomon, that wonderful poem that depicts both the love between a man and a wife and between God and His people, was written by the most crazily excessive polygamist in scripture about his 144th wife, while he already had "virgins without number" waiting to become his next wives after her (Song of Solomon 6:8). The parable of the virgins and the lamps depicts 10 virgins (NOT bridesmaids) waiting for their bridegroom, Christ, and he ends up marrying 5 of them (Matthew 25:1-12). God describes Himself as being married to two women (Jeremiah 3). And of the six faithful men held up as examples in Hebrews 11 whose marital situation is disclosed in scripture, 5 were polygamous and only one was monogamous. Polygamy is so ingrained into the scriptures that it is impossible to miss unless you choose to wilfully ignore it.

"for life" Marriage is certainly intended to be for life, and we are not to break it. However there are circumstances where a spouse has broken the marriage that do justify divorce (e.g. Matthew 19:3-9)

"is the only valid place for sex" This is excellent advice, and will keep you out of a lot of trouble. However wise it may be though, it doesn't actually appear in scripture. It is a prudently conservative position that is very simple to understand and teach, and avoids a range of different sins. However when someone has not followed it, it may be necessary to look beyond this simple advice to the actual detail of scripture to work out exactly if and how they have sinned, and what God would have them do about it.

"if either person has sex with anyone else they're committing adultery" Adultery is clearly defined as when a married woman has sex with a man other than her husband. It is adultery if the wife has sex with someone else, but NOT if the husband does - unless he is himself having sex with another man's wife.

"and must leave their lover and go back to their spouse alone" On the contrary, the Bible states very clearly that if a man sleeps with a virgin he must not leave her, but must marry her. In fact, it would be sinful for him not to marry her, as he would be disobeying a direct commandment of God. So the church, in telling men to abandon their mistresses, is actually telling them to sin. Furthermore God's desire is clearly for all women to at least have the opportunity to marry, not just virgins, so abandoning women is completely the opposite of what the Bible teaches. A man is to commit to the women he has slept with and take them as his wives, not cast them aside as worthless.

"and both polygamy and homosexuality are equally sinful" Polygyny is clearly shown to be allowable, and widely practiced by Godly men. Polyandry is shown to be sinful. The sinfulness or otherwise of homosexuality I will discuss elsewhere, but it can be clearly seen to not be marriage. All three are completely separate and very different issues. But all three are lumped together by most Christians, whose theology basically boils down to "God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve or Adam, Eve and Lynda". This is a very simplistic view of Genesis 2 that is not stated

anywhere else in scripture, and is rather directly contradicted (at least in terms of polygyny) in countless places throughout the Bible.

Back to the glasses

You now have a choice:

Put your glasses back on again, forget everything you've just read, and try very hard to imagine King David as a wicked unrepentent sinner next time you read about him.

Or copy the Bereans, who *"were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so"* (Acts 17:11). Earnestly seek the truth in scripture, accepting what the Bible says even when it disagrees with the words of man. I've only cited a fraction of the relevant verses here, marriage is mentioned throughout the Bible, study it for yourself. That's a lot scarier, but will certainly help you know a lot better what to advise when someone is worried that their son might be living in sin because he didn't get a marriage licence even though he considers his "girlfriend" his "wife", or that Christian brother you always thought was so nearly perfect confesses to you that he's actually been having an affair and doesn't know what to do about it. These issues might be difficult, but they're all around us, and the church needs more people who are willing to actually read and preach the word of God even when it is uncomfortable. Because there are people for whom these scriptures speak directly into their own personal lives.

Next steps

This is only a brief introduction to the scripture behind a wide range of issues. If one of the issues discussed here is particularly relevant for your life right now (for instance, your marriage is on the rocks and you're considering divorce, or you have feelings for two women and don't know what to do), look a lot more into the issue. First, dig deeper into the Bible. However you also need the advice of people who have been through the situation you are in and can help you with the many details, particularly the emotional side, that are not addressed in scripture. Life is complex.

Just because something is allowable doesn't mean it's necessarily a good idea for you. For instance, polygyny is not a sin. However it's extremely complex and difficult, more complicated than monogamy for obvious reasons. Monogamous marriage can be hard enough. Don't jump into something just because you've realised the Bible doesn't condemn it.

Divorce is allowable for clear adultery. But what about grey situations such as serious physical abuse, or unproven adultery? Once again, you need a lot more advice than this small book can provide. This book is simply to point you towards the Bible to help find the answers.

Seek advice from other sources also, you will need it. But judge that advice against scripture. If the advice is compatible with scripture, consider it, but if it contradicts scripture reject it.

Support for problems in monogamous marriage will be available from local churches, seek it out. For more complex situations such as polygyny, where local churches may be unwilling to assist constructively, check out Biblical Families (www.biblicalfamilies.org).

If none of this is relevant to you right now, just remember to judge the actions of others purely by the Bible. Don't condemn someone just because what they are doing doesn't "feel right" to you, only condemn what God condemns. But also don't accept things that God rejects, speak out against them, pointing people back to the Bible. Because if you don't, who will?

Isaiah 5:20 *"Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil"*